TOM SLADE
IN THE HAUNTED CAVERN

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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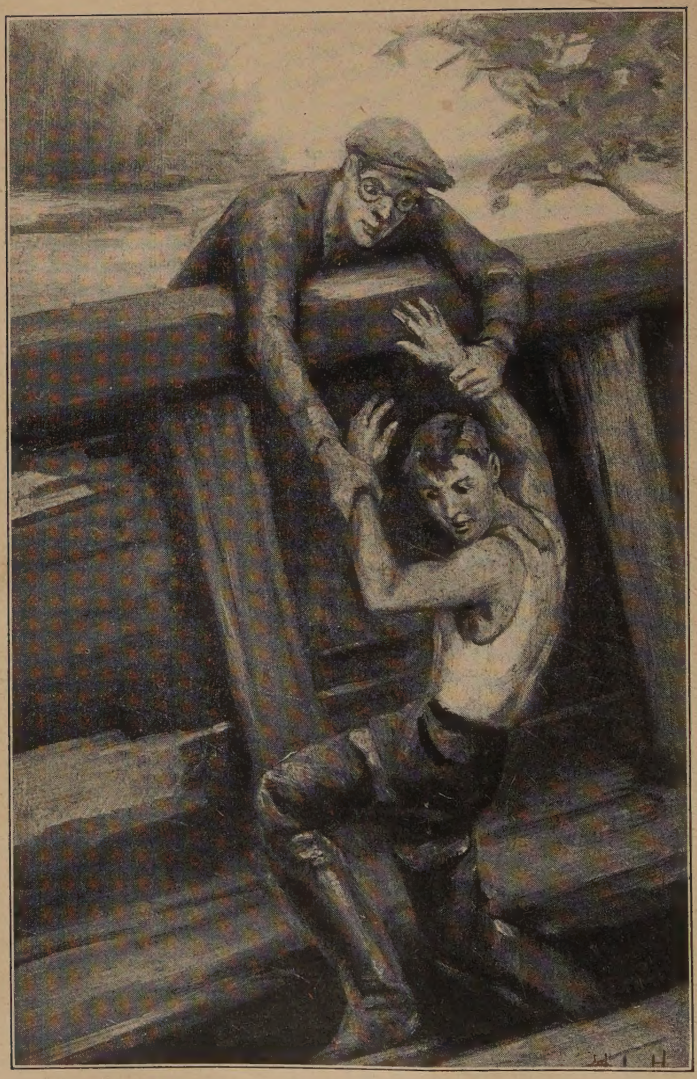

"DON'T LET GO OF ME!" TOM SHRIEKED.

Tom Slade in the Haunted Cavern. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 194)

TOM SLADE
IN
THE HAUNTED CAVERN

BY

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of

THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

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CHAPTER I

BEFORE THE RIVER MOVED

I HAVE only myself to blame for the task which is now before me. I went up Old River for a day's holiday with Tom Slade upon his enthusiastic representation that the stream was full of fish. We caught just exactly two eels and three bullheads; or, to be exact, two eels, three bullheads and a tin can which cut my hand when I tried to disentangle it from my fish line. This was the first blood of the great adventure.

Somebody had told Tom that there were perch, "yes and bass," up the old stream; "thousands, millions of them waiting to be caught. And nobody ever thinks of going up there."

There you have Tom Slade all over. Some-

times I could choke him. Yet again and again I fall a willing victim to his enterprises. And on that day he did get on the track of an adventure—an adventure which has occupied his time for these several weeks past and postponed poor Brent Gaylong's vacation at the seashore. Such a rumpus I never heard.

And now *I* must write out the whole queer business. "It will make a rattling story," enthused my young friend. "Tell it just the way it happened; how if we hadn't gone up there fishing . . ."

And so on, and so on.

"*You* don't have to figure much in the story," he said.

"Thank you, I don't intend to," I answered. "I shall gracefully withdraw after the fishing trip."

"You know how everything happened," he encouraged, "and you know how Brent and I talk—you can put in the talk, all right. Just the way you did in the Bear Mountain yarn."

"I will depict both of you to perfection," I observed.

"Brent's drawling way, you know—"

"And your adventurous blundering," I added. "Leave everything to me. Even the parrot will see all his winsome human traits reflected. Kindly don't come up to see me till the task is finished."

It was only last week that the astonishing climax of Tom's adventure caused no small sensation in this quiet town of ours. And now I notice that our local newspaper is running a series of very interesting articles about the Bridgeboro River in its golden age when coastwise vessels poked their noses up its winding course bringing sugar and molasses from the tropics and sailed away again with their holds full of lumber from our Jersey forests.

I remember as a very small boy playing about old Squire Van Gelder's crate mill where thousands upon thousands of crates were made to be sent to the Indies and there packed with oranges and bananas. I suppose they make their own crates down there nowadays. Some of these old-time articles are full of blunders, as for instance the statement that old Mammy Shannon's hovel in the marsh was washed away when the river changed its course and took a hop, skip and a

jump to another bed some three or four miles east of Old River.

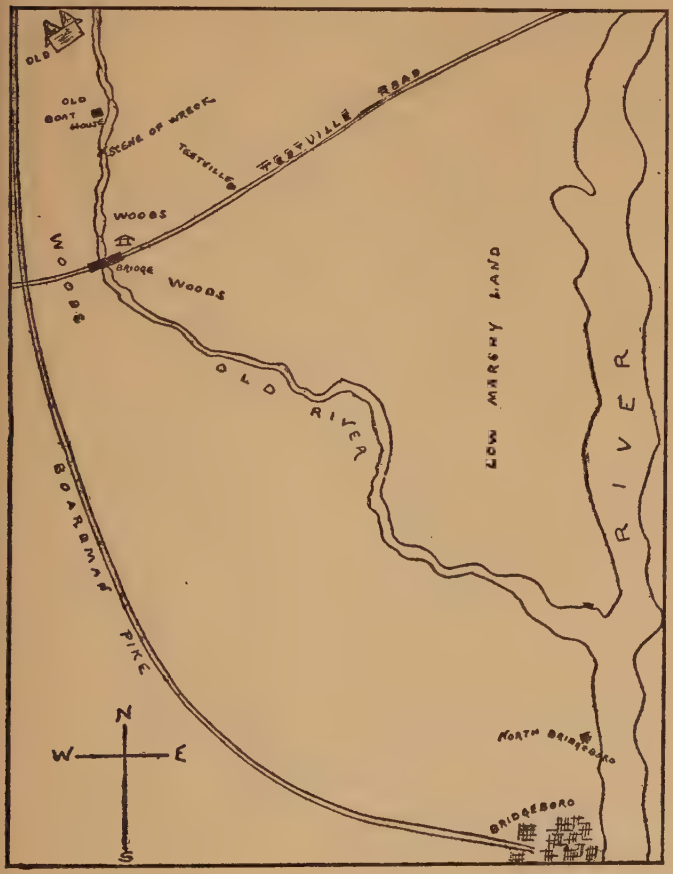
But it is true that the old witch predicted the flood. No matter. Her old hovel on the marsh was moved up to the drawbridge in the woods and placed there for the bridge-tender. Mammy Shannon died in the county poorhouse when I was still quite young. Still, for all, I like these reminiscent articles which the recent adventure of Tom and Brent has inspired.

And here I am committed to the task of writing out the whole strange business about the old schooner, *Carrie C. Boardman.* There is an old crayon of that ship hanging in the Public Library now, and no one ever looks at it. She was built in these parts, down at White's Crossing, and my own uncle riveted some of the planks that are now rotting in a muddy grave.

Well, as I said, Tom asked me to go fishing with him up Old River. I have begun my task by making a crude map of this region which many be helpful to you in reading this winter's tale. And I must tell you something of the locality.

Old River, as I have said, was once a more pretentious stream—it was the river proper.

Those were the days when it bore the ships of commerce on its wider bosom. Sometimes nowadays when the stream is at low tide, you may



see a slimy thing sticking a foot or so out of the river like a ghastly finger. This is the bowsprit of the old schooner *Carrie Boardman,* and the fact that the authorities do not remove this submerged peril indicates how little Old River is frequented in these latter days.

But a more eloquent sign of neglect is the old drawbridge which spans the stream up in the woods and the deserted shack close by it where the bridge-tender once lived. They keep the bridge closed in deference to the rather infrequent passing of cars on the old country road.

We have a new state highway now, running east and west above the region included in my rough map. You will see how the crossing where the bridge is, is embosomed in dense woods. The old bridge and the adjacent shanty look strange enough now in this solemn and deserted wilderness. A couple of miles upstream from the road you will see the old Boardman mansion, falling to pieces, one of those dismal looking places which are commonly alleged to be haunted. If so, it must be by the shades of a patrician family, for the Boardmans in their remote home

were lordly aristocrats in those old days and had grown rich in the West Indian trade.

I have often heard my parents tell how old Roscoe Boardman used to drive down to Bridgeboro with his team and tally-ho when such ostentatious turnouts were even then things of the past. They were veritable "lords of the manor"—these Boardmans. The feature of their palatial establishment which appealed most vividly to my boyish mind was the group of alligators which passed a drowsy existence in the sparkling fountain bed on the spacious lawns. I suppose they had been brought from the West Indies.

One other member of that household was also brought from the West Indies, and still lives in honored old age, after the Boardmans have long since gone the way of all flesh. And this sole survivor is not human. He has triumphed over Time and only lately played his part in a great adventure. Dignified and aloof, he sits in solitary glory, with no heroic ostentation. You shall meet him in good time.

It is odd, when you come to think of it, that the most intensely interesting episode of those

old river days, and one which was connected with this old house of Boardman, was never known to me till very lately, when Tom and Brent brought it to light. And that is the real story of the schooner, *Carrie C. Boardman.*

CHAPTER II

A NEW JOB

"WELL, you've wasted another day for me," I said to Tom. He always understands my complaining to be conceived in good humor. "There is nothing up here, not even fish. But you've had a look at the old country. It's a deserted region, Tommy. Even the river has gone away. This, you see, is only the ghost of the old river, haunting forgotten scenes. Pretty desolate, huh?"

"And the house is haunted, eh?" he commented, as we reeled in our lines just below the old mansion.

"Positively, guaranteed," I said.

"Golly—funny I've never been up here, right around here," he said with an inclusive sweep of his arm, "why, it might be a thousand miles away from town."

"Right," I observed. "You perceive that your

adventurous nature hasn't taken you *everywhere.*"

We rowed down, pausing just north of the bridge. The tide, moving ever as of yore, had risen to within a couple of feet of the bridge, and our old skiff would not pass under.

"Now we're in a pickle," I said. "Marooned in the wilderness. I never gave two thoughts about the tide, did you? That's something that an ex-boy scout ought to have thought about."

Puzzled at our predicament I glanced about. The scene was dismal enough in the mellowing glow of the twilight. Close to either shore the rusted girders and broken railings of the old bridge were partly covered by woodbine, suggesting long disuse. So also the little shack near by was almost buried in these embracing vines which softened its dilapidated appearance. There was a chill solemnity about the dim woods. Every ripple of the steadying oar with which we held our boat was strangely audible in the solitude.

"Such a place to live!" I said. "I wonder what the poor bridge-tender found to do up here in those old days?"

"Well, there were boats passing up and down then," said Tom. "He had to open and close

the bridge, and I suppose they spoke with him as they passed."

"A lonesome life it must have been even then," I mused.

"It's lonesome enough now," he added, glancing into the deep woods. "There's one thing I don't like here."

"The place won't change, Tommy, whether you like it or not," I said.

"That house ought to be occupied," said he, in his boisterous way. "Why, look at that old bridge—closed up and the vines growing on it. This stream is a public waterway—it's open to boating and they can't obstruct it—that's the law!"

"Don't make me laugh," I said. "Who ever comes up here?"

"That doesn't make any difference," said he in that decided way he has. "Not a bit of difference. This is a tidal stream and cannot be obstructed. That's what drawbridges are for. Why, here we are now and we can't get by—waiting for the tide to drop. Where there's a drawbridge, that means that the stream can't be obstructed. There's got to be someone to open

and close the bridge. Why, take the big drawbridge down at Berry's Crossing—I've seen them swing that great big thing around just to let a canoe pass by. They've got to do it!"

"Tommy," I laughed, "look at the vines growing over the ends of the bridge. Why, it hasn't been opened in years. Don't be such a stickler for the law! I doubt if you're right, anyway!"

"How do you know nobody ever *wanted* to come up here?" he snapped. "Why, motor boats could pass up this river, even tugs."

"For why, Tommy? No," I laughed, "there are no tugs."

"You can't close up a river for good and all any more than you can close up a street," he persisted. "Some poor cripple needs that job and he ought to have it. Why, don't you know anything about the public waterways law?"

"You and your public waterways!" I laughed.

"If a boat comes up here once a month, that's enough," he jerked out. "They can't obstruct a stream. And that's what they're doing now. Why did they have to build a drawbridge—why not just an ordinary bridge? Because this is a

tidal stream. That—gol blame it! That's what makes me mad."

"Well, I think we can just about make out to squeeze underneath now, Tommy," I said.

And so we did, by lying almost flat in the boat, but my precious fishing rod was broken against the low metal framework. Tom did all the rowing by reason of my cut hand, and all the way down to Bridgeboro he was stewing away about the "obstructed waterway." He said that if a cabin launch should sail up the river it would have to turn around and go back. And so forth and so on.

In truth, the matter did not much trouble me. And I don't think it troubled many people. Doubtless, from time to time, boats had ascended Old River for no reason at all, their pleasure-seeking owners being willing enough to turn about at the first obstacle.

In the old days of river traffic the draw was necessary. But you see the traffic has been dead these many years and even the river proper (that is our Bridgeboro River) pursues its placid course two or three miles east of these lonesome scenes.

Once upon a time the marsh was flooded and when the waters subsided, there was the Bridgeboro River flowing in a new channel.

It was thus that the old river became nothing but a minor stream. It had jumped its banks above the region shown on my map and ploughed across the low country up there with devastating loss to the farmers. Government engineers came to take note of this boisterous prank of the river, but couldn't do anything. Old Nature had her own way.

And why on earth Tom Slade was lashing himself into a fine heroic frenzy of public spirit about the old bridge was beyond my comprehension. But that is Tom all over. He knows all about the game laws and I have seen him reprove a motorist for throwing a cigarette away on a woods road. He got that training in the Scouts and he thinks he is guardian of all outdoors.

Of course, I thought he would soon forget about this matter for his mind is as fickle as it is active (he will wince when he reads this) and you will therefore understand my astonishment when, several days later, I received the following letter from him addressed to me. "Dear Knight

of the Fountain Pen" (a gentle crack at my unadventurous spirit, which originated not with him but with Brent Gaylong).

Well, you see I'm right, I was in touch with the State Waterways Commission and they as much as admit that there has to be a bridge tender where there's a drawbridge. Why there's even an appropriation for this particular one—eighteen fifty-two a month—in cold cash.

I saw Harley of the County Freeholders and he said O.K.—that was right. You can't close up a public waterway. He says no one would take the job—that's the trouble! They usually have a lame man or a war veteran for that kind of a job. But no one could be got to go up there since the old tender died up there years ago—he was a kind of a Spaniard or something or other, I heard.

Do you know what I am going to do? I bet you'd laugh. That's some lonely spot—you said so yourself. Camping—yes? Leave it to me! I'm going up there for the summer if I can get Brent to go along. The eighteen fifty-two will buy all the grub—maybe! Anyway it'll help. Any boats that want to pass up—Johnny on the spot. Always ready. Service and roughing it all mixed up together.

Of course, I don't care two cents about the job. I mean as jobs go. But there's the place for camping all right. Primitive abode and all that stuff, hey? And we may catch some fish at that—I think you were the hoodoo. Anyway there are beavers in those marshy ponds, I'm dead sure of it. So I'm taking my Kodak. You

know—pictures of beavers at work—why they're worth money.

What I want to know is, will you let us have your rowboat? The steward at the Boat Club tells me you never use it. Otherwise I suppose I can buy one. I've still got my flivver but thought I'd give her a rest for the summer. Anyway the rowboat is what we need for that place—and of course we'll want you to come up some week end and have hunter's stew. I'm going to try and see you in couple of days—I just wanted to let you know.

Good we went up there, hey?

It was amusing how his jealousy for the public interest was all but swamped by his quest for adventure. He was not going to be a useful bridge-tender at all. He was going to be a camper at one of those quaint, remote spots that he loves.

He was going to fish and cook hunter's stew! And I must come up for a week-end! Tom Slade has not the spirit of a bridge-tender. He has the spirit of a pioneer.

CHAPTER III

ESTABLISHED

It was in my presence that Tom drafted Brent into the public service. I went down to the Boat Club with him to get the oars and rudder out of my locker and turn over the boat to him, for he intended to paint it. And there was long, lanky Brent Gaylong sitting on the veranda, his chair tilted back against the building, his feet up on the rail. He was reading a magazine and his spectacles were half-way down his nose giving him that funny old man and professor look which is comical in one so young.

"You're just the one I want to see," said Tom boisterously, and straightway poured out the whole story about the bridge and the shack and his plans.

"What am I supposed to do up there?" drawled Brent. "Turn the bridge around?"

"If a boat comes up at high tide, yes," said Tom.

"Why don't they come up at low tide?" was Brent's leisurely query.

"I don't know," said Tom, a trifle nettled as he sometimes is with Brent. "Maybe none will come up at all."

"Then why go there?" asked Brent.

"Will you please lay down your magazine and listen?" Tom snapped at him. "Don't you want to go camping? Didn't we have a peach of a summer up at that forest lookout station?"

"Every time I dropped my glasses I had to go down fourteen flights of stairs," said Brent. "There wasn't a hook to hang my bathrobe on. I hung it on a jacknife jabbed in the wall and the jacknife fell out when the wind blew and my bathrobe sailed out of the window. I found it in Cornville at the foot of the mountain—three days later."

"Well, I guess the walk did you good," said Tom.

"How far is it to a drug store up there?" Brent drawled.

I couldn't blame Tom for being nettled.

"Do you want to go or don't you?" he snapped. "It's in the wilds and there are no improvements.

You can bring your cards for you'll have plenty of time to play solitaire." Then turning to me he added aloud: "I'm blamed if I know why I like to have him with me—he ought to be in an old lady's home—but he's good company."

"Thanks," said Brent, reading his magazine.

"And you'll go?"

"I'll make the sacrifice. What is there to do on a rainy Sunday?"

"Just what we did up at Long Gulch on a rainy Sunday," said Tom.

"That was to rip my pajamas chasing a garter snake. Nevertheless I will go," said Brent in the voice of a martyr. "When do we start and if so, why not a couple of weeks later?"

"We're going next Saturday, that's the Fourth of July," Tom said.

"We go off on the Fourth," said Brent still reading his magazine.

"Today we paint the boat," continued Tom, "and tomorrow we go shopping for provisions—we'll hit up the chain stores for bacon and sugar and coffee and—here, I've got a list."

"Couldn't we call up the stores?" asked Brent. "Let's go to stores that deliver, then we won't

have to carry any bundles. My mother's way is good enough for me. Shall we take some Eskimo pies?"

"How about brown sugar?" asked Tom, adding it to his growing list.

"Sure, brown is my favorite color," said Brent. "We should have a bottle of olives, and buy a pickle fork at Woolworth's to get them out with. Nothing like having a true pioneer along with you, Tommy. Put down animal crackers and, let's see—how 'bout ginger snaps?"

"Come on, get up and work!" said Tom.

"I thought you said we were going to loaf—and meditate?" asked Brent.

"Not here!" Tom shouted at him. *"Up there!"*

"Pardon—my error," said Brent, letting down his lanky legs from the veranda rail and rising lazily. It is funny to see him. He is so indolent and casual in all his movements. He has a figure like Ichabod Crane in Irving's story. Sometimes I think his legs will fall off. I think he enjoys Tom's annoyance at his exasperating slowness. "Is there any detective work to do up there,

Tommy? Remember Leatherstocking Camp, how I—"

"Come on, help me pull that boat out of the water," said Tom impatiently.

I left them drying off the boat preparatory to painting it. Little I thought as I went away that there was indeed detective work to do up there and that lazy, lanky Brent Gaylong would acquit himself gloriously in those silent wilds. He has a humorous but keen mind and is seldom aroused. To see those two together is as good as a circus, Tom bubbling with energy, and Brent whimsical, lazy and observant. Yet I think he enjoys Tom and likes him quite as much as I do.

The next I heard, they were up at the shack. I think they must have been up there a week or so when I received a letter from Brent (he is a rare correspondent) and I include this in my narrative notwithstanding its irrelevant playfulness. It gives you what you will wish to have, and that is a familiar glimpse of the shack which was to be the scene of startling adventures. The letter was mailed at Teetville, a tiny hamlet on the old road three or four miles east of the river.

DEAR PROFESSOR:[1]

Well, here we are close to nature's heart. The place is not as melancholy as I was made to believe. There is a turtle here; also several frogs who broadcast most every night.

I am mailing this in Teetville, which is four thousand miles through the woods—I walked it and I know. The principal exports are postage stamps. They don't keep two cent stamps, only *ones*—strictly retail. There is a dog there—I think he must be lost.

Ours is a model home with all inconveniences. You will not be able to visit us comfortably for there are only two chairs and one of them has hip disease. But do not despair—we have three cots—two army cots and a collapsible one—it collapses in an emergency. I mean we have it for an emergency. That may mean you—who knows! Also we have a lamp and I got some oil in Teetville. That's why I went there.

And now about the layout of our love nest. As you come in from the bridge (you can also fall in as there is no doorstep—it's level with the ground) you step into our dining-room, living-room and bedroom—all at once. We sleep, eat and sit there and I play solitaire under the glaring light of the lamp. It stands on what was once an oak table but it looks as if it's full of pine knots now. Anyway I have to hold my knee up under it and Tommy follows suit when we're eating to keep the dishes from rolling off. It's quite a trick. Last but not least is our kitchette—it's about two by two and is sort of built on the shack. There's a wood stove in it, a small dish cupboard and a garbage pail that I keep

[1] I am not a professor.

in the corner. The latter won't have to be utilized when you come to visit us. That's all there is in the kitchette—it lives up to its name.

Yesterday I washed the window so we could see through it. It faces the north and we can look up the river. I tried to boil an eel but he escaped from the can when the water got hot. He is still somewhere around. Did you ever try to hold an eel?

The well is in the shack and I am in constant fear that the shack will fall into the well. But there is no water in the well and we get our supply from a spring—a crystal spring I suppose you would call it. I go up there with a colander and have to hurry back while the water runs out of it. I wonder if you'd mind stopping in the ten cent store on your way up and get us a pail?

There is a lot of truck in the bottom of the well. I fished up an old rotten burlap bag with a fish line. You open an old closet or locker just before you step out into the kitchette—well, it isn't any locker anyway—it's just a well. The old oaken bucket is down there all in pieces. I think the eel is hiding down there and that's the reason I don't like to climb down.

Nobody has been up the river. A soap box floated up last night at high tide and I tried to open the bridge for it but couldn't. The crowbar, or whatever you call it, is missing. Tom says it must be around somewhere.

I guess that's about all. We play cards and checkers and go fishing. I know there's a perch in the river because I caught him and put him back.

Yours for public service,

BRENT.

It was my intention to get Bill Scolley to chug me up with his outboard kicker at the next week-end, but I didn't get around to it, and before I did go there were great doings up there.

From this point on I must tell you the story as I heard it long afterward from Tom and Brent and others concerned. But I have heard it so many times and in such detail that I think I can tell it almost as well as if I had been there. To be sure, some of the talk is imagined, but heaven knows I have listened so much to Tom's account of what he said to Brent, and Brent's account of what he said to Tom, that I fancy I can give a pretty accurate picture, not only of their great adventure, but of their character and personalities as well.

At all events, they have both cordially waived any cause they might have in a suit for libel. As for the other main character, the venerable Mascot, all he can do is to scream at me and I don't mind that at all.

CHAPTER IV

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

TOM admits that their life for just ten days was a blissful round of eating, sleeping and loafing. Brent, of course, forced that admission from him in the light of later events, because he (to quote his exact statement) didn't want the public hoodwinked into thinking that he'd be so foolish as to break the spell of their Elysian existence.

Brent also claims that Tom began weakening the threads by wanting to cut down the weeds and trim the vines that were twining so enchantingly around the bridge and even up to the door of the shack. "Why, that's the very thing that makes this place so charming, Tommy," he said in his delightful, drawling way. "Cut down the weeds and I'll no longer feel as if I'm a vagabond."

"Don't you know that's what draws the mosquitoes?" Tom demanded, standing with a sickle in his hand.

"Nonsense," Brent answered. "We'd get them from the marsh in any case. In point of fact, I don't mind them so much—it makes me feel more vagabondish to fight off the pests. Poor defenseless wretch at the mercy of the denizens of the swamp and all that stuff—you know! Contracts a deadly fever as a result and is nursed back to health by his true comrade, Tomasso Slade! I like the sound of that, don't you, Tommy?"

"You sound as if you weren't quite sound in mind. That's how you sound," Tom laughed. "You'd soon cry for a truce with the pests if we had a spell of some nice, sticky weather. Believe me, you wouldn't feel very pretty if they got a good hold on you some night. You'd wake up looking like a natural map of the Rockies—bump upon bump. Do I cut down the weeds or not?"

Brent heaved a sigh of relief. "Just as you say, Tommy," he drawled. "Do I have any part in the labor?"

"Only to gather it up after it's cut," Tom laughed. "That's the easiest part of it. You

can pile it up on the bank and when it dries out we'll burn it up."

"We'll?"

"I will," Tom laughed. "I'll have this place looking civilized if it takes me all day long to do it in."

"Take your time, Tommy," Brent drawled languidly. "It won't matter if I gather it up tomorrow, will it?"

"Oh, I suppose it will end up in me doing the whole thing," Tom grinned.

"You would have only yourself to blame if you do," Brent said. "And I don't like the idea of making this place look civilized—we came up here to get away from civilization. You said yourself that it was the ideal place for roughing it—wild and deserted."

Tom's back shook from laughter as he bent over the sickle. "Do you ever stop to realize the time you spend in arguing? Think of the energy you could use!"

"Think of the energy I save—that's the point," Brent returned. "But I'm afraid I'll have no peace from now on. When you get restless it

sounds the death knell to all my slumbering proclivities."

"Good," said Tom. "Now you can put them to good use."

Brent sighed and dragged his long, lanky frame around gathering up the fruits of Tom's toil. He had to take it up by the handful and it was well along toward evening before the patch just down off the bridge was cleared. It was evident that it would take another day before they could clear it up to the shack.

At any rate Tom announced that he was hungry —an announcement that caused Brent no end of relief. Indeed, he immediately offered to quit and get the supper so that Tom could work on uninterruptedly. "We'll do the dishes together afterward," he suggested, "and then we'll both be able to rest in the twilight."

"You will, you mean," Tom laughed. "Anyway, let's eat."

Twilight was indeed upon them before the dishes were done and they were glad enough to get out of the stuffy little shack. It had grown considerably warmer within the last hour and the humidity was oppressive. Not a blade of grass

moved and except for the sound of the water lapping against the river banks the silence was deadly.

"I'd give the world to see a traffic signal now," drawled Brent as he came out of the shack into the gathering darkness. "Do you think the county would appropriate an arc light for the bridge if we asked them, Tommy?"

"Like fun they would," Tom laughed. "Anyway, you'd be wishing it out of the way if we had one because then we'd have skeenteen kinds of night bugs and bats flying around us when we wanted to enjoy the night breeze."

"I never thought of that," Brent said. "But on a dark night like this a little light wouldn't go bad. Lighting the way to happiness and all that sort of stuff."

"Talking about lights," Tom said seriously, "I'm not so sure but what you are getting your wish." He was looking intently up the river and his arms rested on the broken bridge rail.

"What do you mean, Tommy?" Brent said strolling over to his side.

"Look for yourself and see," answered Tom, pointing.

Brent looked up along the bank where a tiny light cast its cheery glow out upon the river. By all the laws of human nature it should have symbolized friendliness and hospitality in that lonely place but somehow it did not. Not to Tom, at any rate. It had rather a hostile effect instead, and that meant that it puzzled him.

Brent was not aware of any such feeling. He was merely indifferent about it. Perhaps the afternoon's work was responsible. At any rate he blinked his eyes lazily at the little glow and let his long arms support the weight of his body heavily resting upon the broken bridge rail.

"A light is a light, Tommy," he said at length. "The longer I watch it the more I'm convinced that it's a light!"

CHAPTER V

"WHO'S THERE?"

TOM was too interested, too curious, to take notice of Brent's banter. Something had challenged his adventurous spirit and he was on the alert at once. "It's funny," he said, squinting so that he might see farther in the dark. "I can't make out where that light is. Maybe it's a camper though, huh?"

"Not necessarily, Tommy," Brent answered, quizzically. "It might be a lightning bug."

"A lightning bug isn't stationary," Tom said in his boisterous way. "Not this long anyhow."

"Now that's a question for science," Brent said, soberly. "It's something I've often wanted to find out. A lightning bug must certainly rest at some time or other. But when? Or where? Yes, Tommy, it's the ambition of my young life to find out about the life, death and Christian sufferings of the little lightning bug."

Tom suppressed a smile with difficulty. "You're crazy as usual. But we'll talk about that later. The lightning bug theory is disposed of right now. For one thing, the light we're after is at least a quarter of a mile from here. Don't you think so?"

"Whatever you say," Brent answered complacently.

"But I want your opinion," Tom persisted. "What do you think about the light?"

"I think it's fine just where it is," Brent drawled whimsically. "I wouldn't have it any nearer."

Tom stood with his arms akimbo. "Say, will you be serious for a minute? I'm just curious about it because we haven't seen a soul around here daytimes. It's been dead as far as civilization goes. . . . "

"Until you got the idea of cutting down the weeds," Brent interposed languidly. "Now all we've got is dead weeds."

"There you go," Tom said a little nettled. "Listen to what I'm saying, will you?"

"I'm all ears, Tommy. I have nothing else."

"All right, then. We've been here a week

and there hasn't been a human being pass up this river and except for about three or four cars that whizzed along over this bridge we might as well have been in the desert as far as we knew. That is, where neighbors were concerned. Now all all of a sudden we see a light spring up out of the darkness—in this comparative wilderness!"

"Well, it must be campers then," said Brent. "We'll arrive unanimously at that decision because I want to go to bed in peace."

"All right," said Tom laughingly. "It's settled—they're campers. But we'll go and take a look up around there tomorrow, huh? Give them a friendly, neighborly call. What do you say?"

"I have no say in the matter, Tommy," Brent said, in weary tones. "You've decided to go up there so that ends it. I was afraid that our nice, quiet week would get you going. Now you're set to go on the rampage so I suppose I must make the best of it."

That next day, however, there was much to be done. Brent had to go into Teetville for some supplies and Tom decided to go with him. When they got back they were busy about the shack

and they had quite forgotten about calling on their strange neighbor or neighbors up the river.

Before they were aware of it another sun had set, and another twilight wrapped the river and neighboring woods in its protecting shadows. A solemn peace pervaded all. Then suddenly, night, black and starless, shut off the world from the two outside the bridge-tender's shack.

Brent was sprawling rather than sitting in a camp chair, which he had purchased in Teetville that day. His long, lanky legs were crossed in a nonchalant attitude and his bespectacled head was tilted in such a manner that it rested lightly against the side of the shack and afforded him an unobstructed view of the inky heavens—if indeed one can get a view on such a night.

Tom was pacing back and forth across the rickety little bridge in that nervous way he sometimes has when he gets restless and has nothing to do. Each time he walked off the western end of it he stepped on some loose boards that rattled audibly in the quiet night. And coming back the noise would be repeated.

"Can't you jump across those loose boards, Tommy?" queried Brent.

"If I could I wouldn't be here," he answered. "I'd be over at the Olympic games doing my stuff. There's about twenty feet of planking to jump—*you* ought to be able to do it with your height and you could too, with a little practice!"

"Not at my age," Brent drawled. "I'm long on height and short on wind. That's the sad part of it. Otherwise I feel that would have been my calling."

Tom laughed, then stopped suddenly and looked up the river. "Brent!" he called in guarded tones. "Brent, if it isn't that light again!"

"Again or yet?" queried Brent complacently. He did not move a muscle.

"How do I know?" Tom returned. "We didn't stay up all last night to watch it. Maybe it *is* the same light still burning. Anyway, it's a light and we should have gone up there sometime today. *We should have!*"

"Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow," Brent drawled. "I've always found that a delightful rule to go by. If we had gone up there today we would know tonight what and where that light is."

"Well, isn't that what we want to know?" Tom demanded.

"Certainly," Brent answered leisurely. "But by having put it off today we have another night to wonder and speculate in. In other words, it gives us something to look at and think of tonight. Get my point, Tommy?"

Tom turned away from the rail and glanced despairingly in Brent's direction. "I get your point," he said, shaking his head. "But the question looms larger tonight than it did last night. Why, if they are campers, haven't we seen their smoke today? And why haven't we seen some sign of them bathing or fishing? No one camps at the river's edge just to sit and look—they come to a place like this to fish and swim. We do anyhow! We ought to have seen some sign of them today. Heaven knows they would be near enough for us to see. The light is just about where the fountain-pen adventurer and myself cast our lines on our way up the first day I saw this place. There's an old boathouse there and the landing's rotted away. Nothing but a few sticks of wood left. Up above it, a mile maybe, is the old Boardman place. But we couldn't see

a light from there anyway. The woods are in between."

"I'm glad of that," Brent sighed, "and I'm sorry that there was ever a day when you and the professor cast your lines."

Tom chuckled. "That's what he said. But it's a fact, Brent, and it makes me wonder. Why, we sat right under that decrepit old boathouse for four hours. That's where we caught the bullheads. Gosh, I counted every board nailed up against those windows. The one window facing this way had a couple of loose boards that looked as if they had been sort of forced into that position. And that's why I'm curious about it—it looks just as if the light was shining through a sort of chink."

Even as he spoke the light was suddenly extinguished. It happened so quickly that Tom could not be sure but what it was some trick that the darkness had played upon his concentrated vision. He snapped his eyes shut thinking it might have been strain, but when he opened them again he was convinced that the little yellow gleam was indeed gone.

"Well, it's out, all right," he observed.

"Thank goodness for that," Brent remarked, rising. "Now there's nothing to prevent us having a peaceful game of checkers, is there, Tommy?"

"No, you lazy bird!" Tom laughed. "But I won't feel contented until I look that up tomorrow."

"Neither will I," drawled Brent, carefully folding his camp chair. He stopped for a moment and sniffed the heavy, warm air. "Tide must be going out, Tommy. I smell mud and feel mosquitoes."

"Right you are, Brent. She'll be dead low by midnight, I guess."

Brent walked inside and was lighting the oil lamp as Tom entered. The tiny glow cast weird shadows about the dark, dingy walls, but gradually as the flames spread through the wick the place seemed suddenly transformed and became instantly cozy and cheerful looking.

Tom drew two chairs up to their little oak table and Brent went over to his cot and pulled out from under it a checker board. "That's one thing I don't like about this place," he said as he spread it out on the table. "The architect

made no provision whatsoever for closet room. Here we have to keep our clothes in our bags and the rest of the dustproof articles under our cots. What kind of a way is that to build a shack?"

Tom laughed. "You ought to complain to him, Brent, not me."

"He's dead probably," Brent said. "And if he isn't he ought to be. That was a silly idea of his in making that fake locker. What good is it to us?"

"He might have meant it to be a locker or cupboard or whatever you want to call it," said Tom, taking the checkers out of their box. "But I suppose the owner suddenly decided to dig a well there instead."

"Well, I hope he fell into it," Brent drawled. "Maybe that's the reason it dried up. Anyway, I'm going to climb down there some day before the summer's over. I hope I find his skeleton or that eel—it doesn't make any difference."

For the next half hour there was little sound, save for the soft scrape of the checkers being moved back and forth upon the board. The players were annoyed by the occasional buzz of

a mosquito picking out its prey. As it landed there it would pause, then a resounding swat—and the game would proceed.

It was on one of these occasions when Brent was the victim that he slapped his head heartily in quest of the pesky creature and in his distraction lost the game to Tom.

"That means we better call quits for tonight," he said, stretching his long arms lazily. "When there's a bunch of those things around I can't keep my mind on my knitting. I can only do one thing at a time. What do you say we turn in?"

"Righto," said Tom cheerfully. "If I thought there was any chance of us coming up here next summer I'd get a screen door for this shebang."

"Ask the county to appropriate us one," Brent suggested.

"Yes, and catch them doing it too," Tom said as he blew out the light.

Suddenly they were both aware of a sound other than that of their own voices. They stood still and listened and they could hear distinctly the lap, lap of water quite near.

"Raining, I wonder?" Tom queried as he

poked his head outside of the door. Then: "No," he whispered back into the darkened room. "C'm here, Brent!"

They went outside the door and the lapping of the water continued. But now it semed to be going away from them—up the river.

"It's a boat—a canoe being paddled!" Tom whispered. "Can't you hear it?" Then aloud: *"Who's there?"*

No answer came. Nothing but the lapping water and the faint swish that Tom had detected. Then a frog lustily broke the spell for a few moments and suddenly stopped.

"Who goes there? Friend or foe?" Brent called whimsically.

There was no answer save that of his own echo. And indeed one would almost say that was answer enough in the deadly stillness of Old River.

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD BOAT HOUSE

THE darkness seemed to increase the tenseness of the situation. At all events they could not see more than three feet ahead of them and whoever the canoeist was, he had gotten well out of range of their inquiring eyes.

"Whoever it was," said Tom after a few minutes, "I bet they thought you were fooling."

"I was," said Brent. "I must have my little joke. But where's your flashlight, Tommy?"

"I thought of it and the lamp too, but neither would do much good, I guess. My light's too small and the lamp's too rickety. We ought to be better equipped than that. I'll go home tomorrow sometime and get that big one you gave me for Christmas last year. I was saving it for an emergency."

"That's why I gave it to you," Brent said. "I was hoping it would help you throw light on some mystery."

Tom chuckled but quickly stopped and nudged Brent meaningly. "How do you know but what that bird can hear what we're saying?" he whispered.

"Well, he'll hardly know it's himself that's being talked about," drawled Brent. "We won't say anything flattering about him unless he tells us who he is."

Tom literally dragged Brent inside the shack. "Now, no fooling," he said pleadingly. "We gave that fellow chance enough to answer and he didn't. He's got a reason for disregarding our friendly salutes so there's only one construction to put on such actions."

"Monkey business, I suppose," drawled Brent.

"You said it," Tom agreed. "It would be risky for us to try and hunt him in the dark but I'll tell you one thing—I think he has some connection with that light up there."

"I was afraid it would end up this way," Brent drawled complainingly. "You've hatched up a mystery out of a dinky little light and a canoeist that was too stuck up to answer you. But while we're on the subject—if I *have* to go hunting in the dark I want to know where I'm hunting. And

as long as you show a disposition to go night prowling for mysterious canoeists you might give me a day at least to study the lay of the land around here. Just now I can't tell the marsh from the river, except by the smell."

Tom laughed. "It's a go," he said. "We'll see what we can see tomorrow."

Brent began getting ready for bed. "You're making a lot of fuss over nothing, Tommy," he said. "You can't accuse a chap of monkey business just because he doesn't answer you."

"Perhaps not," Tom admitted. "But still if he was bent on honest pursuits, you'd think he'd have no cause to do other than answer me."

"I can think of only one cause, Tommy," Brent drawled as he settled himself in his cot. It creaked audibly.

"What's that?" Tom asked, straightening out his own pillow.

"Maybe he was deaf and dumb," answered Brent.

Tom turned, pillow in hand. "If I hadn't this pillow shaken up so nicely I'd throw it at you," he laughed.

Nothing more disturbed them that night.

They slept soundly until the sun was well up out of the east. The river had been at flood tide during that time and dead low more than an hour past when Tom stepped outside the shack.

"Come on, Brent," he called inside. "It's a swell morning. We can get up the river and down to Bridgeboro by noontime or a little later. I'll promise you that we won't walk much."

"Can I depend upon that?"

"Absolutely. I'm only going to walk up to the house for my flashlight and I think I can dig up enough stuff to make a screen door."

"Well, that's an incentive," Brent drawled, dressing leisurely. It was a half hour later when they stepped down into the rowboat and they had some difficulty in pushing themselves out of the mud.

Tom's theories and anxiety of the night were dispelled in the warm morning sunshine. It seemed incredible that only a few hours ago they could not see farther than the broken rail and yet had distinctly heard the steady swish of the canoeist's paddle.

Brent watched Tom rowing with quiet amusement. "Do you think the county would dock on

the eighteen fifty-two if they knew you were off your job?" he asked at length.

"Don't be foolish," Tom answered. "We won't see a boat up here all summer, I'd like to bet. Not if we haven't seen any so far."

"The professor ought to hear you make that admission," Brent smiled. "He'd kid the life out of you about public waterways."

"Well, if a boat *did* come we'd be there," Tom protested. "And that's what I was arguing with him about. Another thing, the county would excuse us from going off the job on a hunt like this. We have the liberty of seeing that no one evades the law or violates it, haven't we?"

"Well, we're almost there," said Brent, propping his legs on either side of the boat. "You have about twenty more strokes, Tommy, before you solve the mystery."

"How does it look?" asked Tom, not bothering to turn around. "Any signs of camping around?"

"No."

"Can you tell if anyone is inside that old place?"

"Not from here, I can't. My eyesight isn't that good. But if you want me to, I'll call yoo-hoo."

"You'll call nothing," Tom laughed. "We'll wait till we get there."

Tom let the boat drift in to where the bank sloped gradually down to the water's edge. A few sticks stuck out on either side of where the landing had once been. The slimy indentation spoke eloquently of the footsteps that had worn it down to its present condition. But one could see that years had passed since it had felt the trample of many feet. The dank luxuriance growing all around gave silent evidence of that.

A large spider was busily spinning her web around an enormous weed but Tom's oars made short work of that as he pulled the boat up against the bank and it sent the spider scurrying away to parts unknown. Brent fished around the bottom of the boat for the anchor and pretty soon they were fast.

"It's kind of damp here, Brent," Tom said, gazing critically from the embankment up toward the old boathouse. "The land's low and the earth is soggy. We're likely to get our feet a little wet."

"Don't worry about me, Tommy," drawled Brent. "I'm prepared. I put my rubbers in my

back pocket. You see I know these mysterious excursions of yours—I know what they lead to most times."

Tom laughed and helped Brent out of the boat. They scrambled up the slippery bank, Brent adjusting his spectacles deliberately and glancing around in that comical way he has. Then he looked over them at the soggy ground.

"Someone's been walking here, all right," he said. "Maybe it was that frog we heard last night."

Tom shook his head and with an inclusive sweep of his arm drew Brent's attention to where a long stretch of the high grass had been dragged down almost to a level with the ground. "Doesn't that look as if someone's been dragging a boat up here lately—last night?"

Brent shrugged his shoulders and continued to snoop around as they made their way up to the old boathouse. Some birds from the neighboring woods trilled a charming roundelay, a few insects hummed drowsily in the damp, warm weeds but they heard no human step or voice save their own.

Tom walked up to the rickety door and gave

it a resounding knock. They waited quite breathlessly (that is, Tom did) but no answering voice greeted them. The place seemed utterly deserted.

Tom walked around and cautiously peeked in the window where the boards had been loosened. But his efforts were rewarded with nothing more than a vague glimpse of something shiny inside. All the rest was a muddle of darkness compared to the bright sunlight outside.

He could have pulled off the boards with one swift wrench of his tanned, muscular hands. But he dared not. It was someone's property and he respected it. He walked around and joined Brent, felling quite disappointed.

"Nothing doing, eh?" Brent queried.

"Nah, I guess we scared him away last night. Looks so, anyway."

"Well we won't be bothered tonight then," Brent said, with something like a thankful sigh. "We ought to sleep blissfully now."

Tom could only shake his head.

CHAPTER VII

THE WRECK

THEY rowed back through the late afternoon and reached the shack at suppertime. Tom was now in possession of the powerful searchlight and it gave him a feeling of security. "Even if we never use it," he said, "we'll keep it handy. A fellow needs an aid on a job like this. You can never tell . . . "

"When the oil lamp'll give out," Brent interposed.

Tom smiled and went out to the bridge. He had done this many times since their return. He said he had a feeling that each time he went there he would see something up the river. But he did not. And he walked back again thinking the whole thing quite strange.

"No matter when I've looked up there," he said to Brent, "I haven't seen a soul. I don't know why I look—that padlock on the boathouse

door is proof enough that whoever it was went away. But somehow I have a feeling about the place—I don't know—as if I will see something if I keep on looking."

"It's the air on Old River, Tommy," Brent drawled. "It's having an effect on you."

"I don't know," Tom said seriously, ignoring Brent's banter. "One thing, that old Boardman wreck sticking out there at low tide gives me the creeps. You'd think they would have removed it long ago. If there *was* much river traffic, a stranger would get an awful spill there at high tide. Anyway, I don't like the looks of it."

Brent managed to rouse himself and walked to the window. He gazed rather indifferently up the river at the bit of wreck poking itself up out of the mud. It looked to be no more than a foot high and on a cloudy day reminded one of a long, gray ghostly hand pointing heavenward.

"What do you know about that wreck, Tommy?" he asked at length.

"Nothing much," Tom answered, "except that it went down maybe thirty or thirty-five years ago—maybe more. None of the Boardmans are left—I guess there isn't even an heir to the ruins

of the old Mansion. It's about two miles up from here. There's nothing below and above the old place but swamp and woods. Too bad the river played such a trick—the property would be worth something now."

"Yes," said Brent musingly. "It's interesting. Old family and an old schooner. Did you say you knew the name of the barge, Tommy?"

"Schooner," Tom corrected smilingly. "Our fountain pen adventurer told me it was called the *Carrie C. Boardman* and was named after old Roscoe Boardman's only daughter. I heard somewhere once something about a son who was killed in the West Indies, I think. Anyway, the old man died a little while after the schooner sank and his daughter didn't live long after that. She must have been kind of young when she died."

"Maybe Carrie Boardman haunts her own schooner, eh?" Brent asked whimsically.

"Maybe," answered Tom with a shudder. "I don't like to think of it or look at it."

"Well, I'll do it for you," Brent said complacently. "Why do you suppose that one part sticks up and not the rest?"

"The professor and I argued about that the

day we were up here," Tom answered. "He finally convinced me that some of it struck a sand pile and the rest is rocky bed. Sounds plausible, huh? Anyway, it's too rotten to salvage if that's what you're wondering."

Brent made no comment about that. He just stood musing and frequently tapped the window sill with his bony knuckles. "I suppose the papers were full of it for a few days?" he queried leisurely.

"The wreck, you mean? Oh, I suppose so," Tom answered. "Naturally, it was a big thing for a little Bridgeboro paper. And Bridgeboro must have been pretty small in the days when the river was so big. I know the professor said the Boardmans were considered quite high society then. That's about all he knows, too."

"Well, I rather like what I've heard," Brent drawled. "And I won't mind seeing that little bit of *Carrie* every day. In fact, I shall look forward to it with extreme pleasure."

"And the pleasure's all yours," Tom laughed. "Let's talk of cheerful things."

Twilight came once more. The tide rose and fell and the evening wore away before they knew

it. The sun had gone under a cloud late in the afternoon and the evening had been too humid and damp to sit out of doors.

"I wish we'd have a long night of nice, cool rain," said Tom, poking his head out of doors to inspect the heavens. "The mosquitoes are thick and . . . *Brent!*"

"Eh?"

"It's the *light—again!*"

Brent shuffled out to Tom's side and together they stared at the little yellow glow upon the misty water. There was something weird and ghostly about its steady flicker.

"Now's our chance, Brent!" Tom said impulsively. "Let's go!"

"Now I'm in for it," Brent said wearily. "Just when I was ready for a good night's sleep too. But no, you must be dragging me out on that black river chasing up a glowworm. Well, come on, let's get it over with."

They got into the boat and were soon skimming noiselessly up the river. "I'm glad it's misty," Tom whispered.

"So am I," Brent answered. "We might run plunk into your mysterious friend on the river. I

hope we do. It would save us the trouble of going all the way up to that boathouse."

"I don't hope any such thing," Tom said. "I'd like to see what he's up to first."

"I hope we catch him playing checkers," Brent drawled.

They reached the landing place without much difficulty and cautiously made their way up the embankment toward the boathouse. Just short of it, Tom stopped and pointed to where the door was padlocked. The light trickling out from the unboarded window cast an odd reflection upon the worn red paint of the old building.

Tom held his breath and knocked. "Anyone in there?" he called loudly.

The silence was depressing until the still air itself seemed to become sound. Suddenly from quite near them they could hear the unmistakable purr of an engine.

"It's a car!" whispered Tom. "Do you think it's near?"

But even as he asked the question the purring became fainter and fainter. Finally it ceased altogether and the dismal, ghostly place lapsed back into its uncanny silence.

CHAPTER VIII

BRENT'S VIGIL

THEY stood staring at each other for a while, then Brent smiled. "What do you suggest doing next, Tommy—calling the police or the fire department?" he queried.

"You have to admit that bird is up to something!" Tom declared boisterously. "But we can't call the police until we have something to work on—a clue. I have a hunch that he's a counterfeiter."

"I hope he is," drawled Brent. "I've always wanted to meet a nice, jolly counterfeiter. Say it with money, eh?"

"This would be a likely place," said Tom, ignoring Brent's banter. "I suppose he's counted ten to one that no one would ever bother him up here. Let's walk up a little way and see where that car was parked."

"It sounded rather flivverish to me," Brent observed.

"Well, he got away in it, anyhow," Tom said walking slowly ahead. He flashed his light over the mist-covered path and here and there they could see a man's footprint in the soggy earth.

In a few moments they reached a wider path where the weeds had been carefully cut down. Farther on was a clump of trees and the tracks of the departed car could be plainly seen. Just beyond was a narrow country road running north and south.

"Do you suppose that crosses the Teetville Highway?" Tom asked.

"You're not going to suggest that we walk it to find out, are you?" Brent asked, alarmed.

"No," Tom laughed. "I'm not going to ask you but I'm going to find out myself *tonight!* You can go back in the boat and I'll see you safely off. Then I'll see where this road brings me out. I bet I'll get back to the shack long before you."

"I don't envy you, Tomasso, not at all," Brent said, as they started back toward the river. "Only be careful that you don't step in a swamp or worse."

"I guess there isn't anything to worry about. And I don't believe there's any quicksand," Tom

said gaily. "Don't get fussed up, Brent. I'll be as safe as if I were walking on Broadway."

"It would have been just as well to leave our calling cards for the counterfeiter or whatever he is, when he returns," Brent said. "If you'd only wait we'd hear from him and you wouldn't have to go to so much trouble. Maybe we could have induced him to talk terms with us if we had used more persuasive methods upon our arrival. By now we might have had a share in the business. Who knows!"

Tom's laughter rang out over the misty river. "You row back leisurely, old man," he said. "And I bet before you get back on the bridge, I'll be there!"

He pushed the boat off with Brent still protesting. Tom stood on the bank watching and was considerably amused at his slow progress with the oars. "You're a little bit out of practice, aren't you?" he laughed.

"I'd rather do it than walk," Brent answered. "It's not such a tax on the brain. Hurry along now, Tommy."

Tom turned his light back on the path and Brent was soon enveloped in the mist and dark-

ness of the river. But the little yellow glow from the boathouse followed him along that black, watery path and the frowning woodland that lined either shore now looked like huge spectral cloaks, dipping their frayed ends into the silent stream.

Brent was never the nervous sort nor was he very imaginative. But he did love companionship and without it he was lonely. Consequently he was tempted once or twice to call to Tom just for the sake of breaking the chill solemnity of the misty night. But he thought that his friend must, by now, be pretty well along the dark road. Tom was a swift hiker.

Finally he came abreast of the old Boardman wreck. It could be seen quite plainly in the little light from the boathouse. He rested his oars and stared, fascinated by the gray, ghostly thing sticking there out of the mud. That gleam of yellow seemed strangely concentrated upon this relic of the dim past. Indeed, it even lighted up the little area surrounding the rotting hulk, giving one the impression that the wreck must have some magnetic power of drawing the light.

Brent could see that at low tide one could

stand in the mud and touch the ghastly looking object. And the tide was going out now quite fast. By twelve o'clock one could do it with ease. He wondered if it would fall apart with handling.

But in the midst of these musings he yawned audibly, took up the oars again and started more vigorously this time for the bridge. When it came to choosing between his love for ghostly wrecks and his love for sleep, Brent always chose the latter.

And so he tied the boat up under the bridge and climbed the bank. There was no light in the shack and he straightway walked to the farther end of the wooden structure and peered down the road. There wasn't a sound, not even in the distance.

"Oh, Tom-my!" he called cheerily. "I beat you to it!"

There was no answer from Tom and the air was so heavy that he did not hear even an echo of his own voice. "I knew he couldn't make it in that short time," Brent said aloud. "That road must stretch out quite some before it meets this one."

He walked to the shack, groped his way through the dark interior and finally found the table and lamp. He lighted it carefully and then went back and shut the door to keep out the mosquitoes. After that he drew a chair up to the table and settled himself for a quiet game of solitaire while he waited.

Those who have indulged themselves in this solitary pastime can readily testify as to its amazing disposal of time. An hour can be easily spent in waiting for the decisive card to appear out of a capricious pack. And so it was that night with Brent. An hour and a half had gone by before he won a game.

He got up and went to the door and opened it. His features became fixed as he listened. Rather indifferently, he noticed that the mist was lifting and straight above his head a star was shining bravely through the clouds. After a few minutes he went back to the table and his cards.

"It can't be that he'd get lost," he mused aloud as he set a queen of hearts under a king. "But of course, that's impossible with Tommy! He's found out it's a longer route than he thought. That's about it."

Another half hour had gone. Brent looked at his watch. Twelve o'clock. A worried look crept in under his spectacles and he piled the cards neatly into their box. Then he rose and went outdoors again.

He walked to the far end of the bridge and peered eagerly down the road. The mist had gone completely and he could see along the dusty highway for quite a distance. But no sign of Tom could he see; no sound he could hear.

"I wonder if he got on the track of that fellow and tried to trail him?" he asked himself aloud. "It's like Tommy to do it. Just like him to do it!" Then: "I shouldn't wonder but that's what he's up to."

He felt better after that decision and hunted for a place on the old drawbridge where he might sit and watch. But it was quite damp from the recent mist and the under railing was broken so that he couldn't rest his feet on it. He decided to go back in the shack and wait.

"There's really nothing to worry about," he tried to comfort himself. "Tommy wouldn't do anything that was foolhardy. No, there's really nothing to worry about!"

He fussed at the oil lamp, turning the wick up and down a half dozen times or more. Then he went over to his cot and took a half reclining position on it, leaning heavily on one elbow. But always he was listening.

After another half-hour's vigil his eyes refused to stay open. His elbow kept slipping from under him and gradually his head reached the pillow. He was sound asleep.

CHAPTER IX

"LOST, STRAYED OR—"

He awoke suddenly and was sitting up before his eyes were fully opened. Yes, he told himself, he had been sleeping. The light was still burning and . . . He looked at Tom's cot—empty.

No, he hadn't come. Of course he hadn't! Everything was just the same as before. All except Tom. He looked at his watch nervously. It was half-past three.

He went outdoors—walked over the bridge and onto the hard, dusty road. The air was clear, a cool breeze blew and it revived him—gave him new hope that perhaps it was just another exploration of Tom's into the realm of adventure. He had done things of that nature before. At Leatherstocking Camp that time when he was gone so long and they thought he had been killed.

"But it wasn't exactly like this affair," Brent

mused as he strode along. "He didn't promise us any special time to return. And he distinctly told me this time that he would be at the bridge before I was! It was a sort of promise."

After a few steps further: "I don't like the looks of it! I should have gone with him—*I should have!*"

In this mood he stepped lightly over the rutty highway. He looked eagerly for some road that would take him up the river. And all the while he kept muttering worriedly to himself.

"Maybe it doesn't come out on this road at all," he argued with himself. "If it does, it must be an awfully long way down."

In his anxiety, he did not take into consideration that distance seems an eternity when one is in a hurry. For, to be exact, he had been walking just six minutes and thirty seconds when he espied the break in the road. He timed himself sometime later.

It was the first time he remembered having taken a running step since he was at school. He fairly raced around the bend, bareheaded and breathless. When he got a few feet farther he had to stop and rest.

He was startled suddenly by a strange voice. "Where are *you* going?" he was asked harshly.

He quickly regained his composure and stood on guard. "Who wants to know?" he returned in his usual leisurely way.

Just then he caught a gleam of metal from under the trees. Naturally he was frightened, but nevertheless he stood his ground. Then a man emerged pushing a motorcycle before him. Brent felt an almost hysterical relief at the welcome sight.

It was a state trooper.

"I'm the one who wants to know," the man said, a little less harshly. "Now how about an answer to my question? It's a pretty fancy hour for a young guy like you to be runnin' bareheaded in this neck o' the woods!"

"I know it," Brent smiled. "But you couldn't hardly expect me to answer such a question unless I knew to whom I would be talking."

"Righto," agreed the trooper. He scrutinized Brent keenly. "So . . ."

"I'm staying up at the drawbridge with a friend of mine—Tom Slade, bridge-tender," he said in his drawling way.

The man nodded. "Yeh, I've heard about a couple of young guys taking that. So you're one o' them—just for the summer, eh?"

"Yes," Brent answered. "Business and pleasure combined. You know. But mostly pleasure. We've been there over a week now and there hasn't been a boat come up yet."

"And there won't be," said the man. "Things are deader than dead on Old River. I ought to know. In fact all around here. To tell you the truth, I was trying to get forty winks under that tree myself. Been helping out one of the boys that's been sick and fifteen hours of riding makes a guy pretty fagged—*believe me!*"

"I bet," Brent said pleasantly. He was turning over and over in his mind how much he would tell the officer of their quest at the old boathouse. But he realized that after all they had nothing definite to tell of the man in the car. He had a perfect right not to answer if he so wished. They had proved nothing.

Somehow Brent had the amateur sleuth's dread of telling a policeman of his suspicions and vague clues. He decided finally to keep that part of the story to himself. Consequently, the officer

was given to understand that the two bridge-tenders had been merely nosing around in the mist and Tom, he told the man, had decided to walk back and see where the road came out.

"So, you see," Brent said, "I got back all right but when he didn't come, I started worrying, naturally. And now I'm rather upset about it. I can't understand it!"

"Aw, I guess nothing's happened to him, young feller," the trooper said pleasantly. "It's a long hike from the place you describe. At least three miles—and some parts I've been knee deep in water too! Terrible marshy, but not dangerous. I bet he gave up the idea when he saw that marsh. He probably went hiking back to that old boat-house to bunk there for the night."

"He couldn't. It's padlocked," said Brent.

"Well, then he's found some other dry place to bunk," said the man, hearteningly. "They are to be found—I find 'em!"

Brent smiled. "I wish I could believe that. But Tom knows what an old lady I am—he'd hardly keep me on the anxious seat all night."

The officer smiled. "Now, I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll scoot up there for you and look

him up. Then I'll whizz up to the bridge and let you know. I won't take you with me because I couldn't have three coming back on my Fierce-Sparrow. I'd be likely to dump one of you in the marsh. Anyway, I'll be off."

In a moment he was gone and Brent reluctantly made his way back to the shack. He got his camp chair and brought it outside. Tilting himself against the side of the building he prepared to wait, patiently, hopefully.

Dawn crept slowly up on the distant horizon and soon the whole eastern sky was flecked with tiny points of light. It seemed to Brent that he had been waiting for hours before he heard that welcome, familiar chug of the motorcycle.

He stood up and looked eagerly down the road until the trooper came into sight. Then he pushed his spectacles more firmly on his nose and stared hard as the officer steered his machine over the loose boards of the drawbridge.

Tom was not with him.

The man came abreast of Brent and precipitately swung the motorcycle around. "Got to get right back," he explained breathlessly above the roar of the motor. "I'm due on the pike at

four-twenty so I'll have to skip some. No sign of your friend around that old boathouse. Everything was as dark as pitch. I looked a little further up by the old Boardman Mansion, too. Guess he found himself a nice, dry bunk for the night. Don't worry—you'll see him in a couple o' hours, I bet. So long!"

The motorcycle rattled off the drawbridge as noisily as it had come. Then it was gone. Brent stood staring after it, unable to think or move.

CHAPTER X

A SHOCK

"I SHOULD have told him!" Brent muttered after a little while. "I should have told him the whole thing. He's never realized how serious it is."

He felt foolishly helpless as he stood there. And he looked it. It hardly seemed to be the same indifferent, easy-going Brent. The change was incongruous somehow. In place of the twinkling, bespectacled eyes, there was a gray, worried expression. It would have inspired mirth even in Tom.

After a time he entered the shack and made himself some coffee, black and hot. It pulled his nerves together enough so that he was able to think out some concerted plan of action. Then he hurried out, got into the rowboat and pushed into midstream.

He had seldom, if ever in his life, exerted him-

self to the point of perspiring. But that morning he came as near to it as he ever had. He rowed with effort against the tide and finally reached the landing place under the old boathouse.

The trooper was right, he realized as he climbed up the bank. "The light is out there, all right," he whispered. "Now I've got to be careful, cautious. Maybe Tommy wasn't!" The thought chilled him.

He walked noiselessly through the high weeds in the old path. A good deal of it had been trampled considerably and the growth to his left, that he had noticed the day before, looked still more broken and bent in the early light of morning.

The padlock was still in place and it was hard for him to realize that everything *did* look the same around the place. All except the light. He centered his attention then upon the soft, soggy ground and tried to pick out his own and Tom's footprints from that of the third party. But it was a futile task.

"Tom might be able to do it," he murmured rather hopelessly, "but I can't."

He stopped just under the boathouse window and thought it over. He decided to walk up to the road and go back to the bridge the same way that Tom had promised to go. Marsh or no marsh, he resolved to make it. Just then a mischievous little breeze slightly rattled the loose boards above his head and he glanced at them casually.

He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before—why Tom hadn't thought of it last night. He had not the slightest trouble in looking through the window and he shaded his eyes from the light so that he might see more clearly for it seemed to be quite dark beyond the window sill.

After a few seconds the blur passed away and his eyes got used to the dark interior. He could see something in there—a little away from the window; perhaps a distance of about six feet. He pressed his face closer to the dusty pane.

Soon the object took form—he could see it clearly now. It was—yes, it was a human being! He moved a little to let the daylight aid him. It was just enough to throw that face and its features into bold relief against the dark background.

He pressed closer and saw to his horror that something red seemed to be covering the hands and lower part of the body. The eyes were closed. . . .

There wasn't any doubt of it. It was Tom.

For the moment, Brent almost lost his head. He was too shocked to utter a sound and was all for breaking the window. But when reason reasserted itself in his mind he knew that such a movement would not get him anywhere. The window was too small and narrow to allow more than his head to go through.

Next, he thought of the door and he went around and fumbled with the padlock. But it was useless. He hunted around for a stout stick to see if he could wrench it loose.

This search took him up almost as far as the pike but all he could find was rotten wood. Nothing could stay dry very long in that soggy earth. He returned to the old boathouse, disheartened and disgusted.

Again he tried the door and touched it here and there to see if any part of it was soft. But the whole place seemed to have stood the ravages

of time remarkably well. It was firm and gave not the slightest under his persistent pressure.

Finally he gave it up and hurried around to the window again. There he pressed his face close to the pane, hopefully and then despairingly. Tom was still in the same position.

There was almost a deathly stillness about him, Brent thought. He walked away from the tragic sight and decided that his only salvation would be to get help. But all that would take time, and time might mean life to his best friend.

He would not admit the worst. He thought of it but would not consent to it. He would not believe Tommy dead until he *had* to believe it. Until then . . .

There was a crowbar down at the shack—the one he and Tom had fooled about opening the drawbridge with. He thought of it with rising spirits and was positive that if he went down and got it he could wrench the padlock off with that. And if that availed him nothing, he would then break down the door with it.

It seemed the best and quickest plan to him and he resolved to act upon it at once. He strode

down the embankment in all haste and got into the boat. He couldn't help wondering what Tom would think if he could see the speed with which he pushed the boat off.

Perhaps he had gone twelve yards, perhaps more. At any rate, he heard a muffled cry and a loud pounding as if on glass. His heart seemed to leap up into his throat as he rested the oars and listened.

But it came louder—a sort of stifled shouting and in its wake, a vigorous bang. Brent looked up at the boathouse, perplexed. Then he fairly shoved the boat back against the bank and jumped on to shore again.

The sound was not coming from the door. He knew that. Breathlessly, he reached the window and looked. What he saw shocked him, leaving him trembling and unstrung. But it was true and as real as life itself.

Tom's face was there, pressed hard against the window-pane.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT TOM OVERHEARD

WAS it his ghost or was it actually he? The question flashed through Brent's mind as he continued to stare. But no, Tom was speaking, almost shouting at him.

"Gosh, I'm glad you came, Brent," he was saying, with a ring of feeling in his voice. "I've been here all night—I'm locked in! Can you get me out? I'm suffocating with the heat."

"Then—then you're not hurt—not bleeding or anything?" Brent asked incredulously.

Tom shook his head and really smiled. "Hurt? Bleeding? You look as if you've been dreaming or seen a ghost," he called with a laugh. "I'm O.K. except that I'd give my kingdom for one breath of fresh air."

"Want me to break the window, Tommy?" Brent asked feelingly.

"Oh, *no-o!*" Tom exclaimed vehemently.

"Not that—no matter how much I want the air! For a good reason, I don't want you to, Brent. I'll tell you later."

Brent nodded. "Then I'll wrench the padlock off," he said. "That's what I was starting back for when I heard you calling. I was going to get the crowbar."

Tom laughed. "It's going to be useful for something after all, huh?" Then he looked thoughtful, and: "But I don't want that bird to know we've been monkeying around here. He doesn't know I've been in here even and I saw and heard enough of him last night to convince me he's up to something."

"Leave it to you, Tommy," Brent said.

"How can you get me out without making it appear that we wrenched the lock?" Tom queried. "He knows we're down at the bridge but he doesn't think we have anything but a neighborly curiosity in him. That's straight!"

"All right," Brent answered. "That's easy, Tommy. You just leave it to me. I'll get down and back as soon as possible."

Tom smiled joyfully. "You bet I'll leave it to you!" he shouted.

Brent was as good as his word. He hurried down to the shack and secured the crowbar. Then he grabbed four bananas, and out of a box where they kept the bread he managed to get a lot of crumbs which he put in a paper bag. A stale piece of cake was thrown in and he wrapped the whole thing together. Lastly, he got a good sized piece of chalk out of the inner recesses of his traveling bag.

"I've been carrying this around for no apparent reason," he drawled aloud as he put the chalk in his pocket. "I got it—let's see . . . Oh, I got it before Tommy and I blazed that trail through Old Hogback Mountain. Now I remember—I bought it just to get his goat. And now—now I *can* use it."

He smiled and hurried back to the boat. As he came up the embankment below the boathouse, Tom watched him wonderingly. He looked as if he were bringing a lunch and was bent on frivolous pursuits but the crowbar in his right hand belied the gayety in his left hand. Indeed the thick iron bar looked almost menacing.

In that deliberate way he has, Brent laid the luncheon package down upon the ground. Then

he got to work with the bar and it wasn't long before the padlock began to loosen from it's rusty iron ring. A few more tugs and it came away with a loud squeak.

Tom burst out of the door, joyfully. He all but hugged Brent and as soon as he had filled his lungs with the fresh morning air he pointed to the variety of edibles on the ground. "What's the idea?" he laughed.

Brent smiled. "We eat the bananas, but give the skins to me. And the crumbs—you'll see about them," he drawled, mysteriously. "But first, Tommy—what was that red I saw on you?"

Tom laughed heartily. "Did you think I had been murdered? That was an old piece of burlap bag all covered with red paint. I laid it under me when I went to sleep but I guess I must have rolled around because it was on top of me when I woke up."

"Well, I thought you were dead—sure. What else was I to think? Your eyes were closed and you were lying so still. . . ."

"You poor fish," Tom said with emotion, "I was asleep. Sound asleep at that. And no wonder. I had been pounding on that door from

about a half hour after you left until, maybe, two hours ago. Gosh, I was all in."

"You look it," Brent observed. "Eat a couple of bananas, Tommy. If they don't give you calories they'll give you indigestion. We'll have a good feed when we get back."

"I hope to tell you," said Tom, with a mouthful of banana. "You hadn't been gone more than three minutes last night when I heard that car heading toward me. I was up on the road and, boy, you couldn't see me for dust the way I ran back here."

"I wondered," said Brent.

"Yes, I knew it was my chance to see something so I sneaked down closer to the river and hid over in that real high grass. I could hear the car stop and then a footstep came after that. I had to peek cautiously but I could see this small, slim fellow looking all around and then down the river. I couldn't see his face.

"Anyway, I could hear him sort of mumbling like and finally he opened the padlock and went in. In a few seconds he came out, looked all around and went back up to the road. And, incidentally, he left the door open.

"I didn't waste any time, *believe me!* I rushed right up to see what the attraction was. But there isn't anything startling—nothing but what you see in all boathouses, I guess. A lot of junk."

Brent strolled inside and looked around. Tom followed him. "You see there's nothing but the canoe, those old packing cases lined up against the wall and that lantern," he said.

Brent centered his attention upon the lantern. It was standing on a home-made shelf right at the unboarded window. Tom noted his friend's close scrutiny of it. "That's the mysterious part of this whole thing, Brent," he said in that boisterous, excitable way he has. "You ought to have seen the pains he took in getting that lantern just so on that shelf! He fussed with it for ten minutes it seemed to me."

"You saw all that—saw him?" Brent asked.

"I only saw his profile—he kept his hat on all the time!" Tom exclaimed. "But I could see he was short and slim. Anyway, I wasn't in here nosing around only a few minutes when I heard his footstep. Gosh, I was nervous! I was

afraid I'd be seen if I ran out so I decided to hide behind those packing boxes. And, *boy,* I wasn't any too soon in getting there! He came right in."

Brent took one of the packing boxes off the pile and put it on the floor. Then he sat leisurely down upon it and twisted his long, lanky legs over each other.

"I'm a trifle fatigued, Tommy," he drawled. "Go on—so he came right in . . ."

"Yes, he came right in," Tom went on, "and I could only see through a little slit where the box was cracked open. He had a pick-axe and a shovel in his hand and after he laid them down he started fussing with the light like I told you before.

"Well, it was then that I got a good look at his profile—that is, if you can ever remember a person again by their profile. . . ."

"It's difficult, Tommy."

"I know it, but I'll never forget the way he sort of chews on his underlip. I think he blinks his eyes too—it looked that way to me. Anyway, he keeps moving his hands pulling at his tie or

a button on his coat. Gee, I've seen someone do that in Bridgeboro before, but I can't think where."

"This is interesting," said Brent.

"I'll say it is," Tom smiled. "But I know he's not a counterfeiter or anything like that. . . ."

"Hardly. They don't manufacture money with a pick-axe and shovel."

Tom laughed. "I know it. But wait—he was talking to himself—loud! I could hear every word and he said: 'I hope those two snoops from the bridge don't try any more neighborly calls. They're getting to be a nuisance! Just when I want to get going on this thing.' "

"Ah-ha," drawled Brent. "So the plot thickens!"

"Now you're saying something!" Tom enthused. "When he got the lantern placed to suit him he stood there looking at it and blinking his eyes. Then he said: 'I've *got* to think of some other way—*I've got to!* If they try any more of their get acquainted tactics, they'll spoil my whole party. Anyway, I'll let it go tonight—it's too misty!' "

"Monkey business," interposed Brent.

"Before I realized it, he put out the lantern and the place was in darkness," said Tom. "The next thing I knew I could hear him at the padlock. You can imagine my feelings when I had to stand there listening to that car start and go away.

"Then just before dawn I heard a motorcycle stop for a few minutes. It was too dark to see and I was afraid to call for fear it might be him. Anyway, it went away and I finally fell asleep."

Brent related the story of his own night's anxiety and of his encounter with the trooper. "I'll never forget the shock I got when I saw him come back without you, Tommy," he said. "I'll never be the same again. I doubt if my brain will ever function enough for me to play another game of solitaire."

"Oh, you'll come around, all right," Tom laughed.

"Well, I'll have to go to bed an hour earlier each night—that will be for six nights," he said soberly. "I'll have to catch up somehow."

"How about making it up after we get back?" Tom asked, attacking a third banana.

"No," said Brent. "I'm going to grab that

other banana before you get the chance to gobble it up too. And you know, Tommy, that bananas always give me the most horrible nightmares. I'll wait until night and then it will be sufficiently digested for me to sleep sweetly."

CHAPTER XII

CAMOUFLAGE

"WHAT dark secret have you up your sleeve about these banana skins and the rest of the junk?" Tom asked.

"You watch Papa Brent," he answered whimsically.

He got up and took several of the packing boxes, arranging them in such a manner as to give one the impression that they had been carelessly thrown down. Then he distributed the cake and bread crumbs over them and allowed a good deal of it to go on the floor. And last of all he flung the banana skins about and stood for a moment gazing over his spectacles at the havoc he had created.

"It looks like the remains of a hilarious picnic," Tom laughed.

"That's the way I intended it should look," Brent said. "The only things missing are the sticky paper plates, soiled crumply paper napkins

and empty olive bottles. But then perhaps he'll never notice that." And as an afterthought: "Otherwise, as man to man, Tommy, would you say everything was in perfect disorder?"

"Perfect," Tom laughed. "So that's the effect you're striving for, huh?"

"It is," Brent answered. "Now one thing more, Tomasso. I have a little message to leave for Mr. . . ."

"Gosh, I wish I had seen his face better," Tom said regretfully. "But I could swear I've seen him in Bridgeboro—just by his walk and that nervous way of his. I can't think of his name though until I see his face."

"Naturally," Brent drawled, with his chalk poised in mid-air. "It doesn't make any difference, anyway. We wouldn't be supposed to know his name if you don't want him to know that we've been here. So I'll just greet him in the ordinary way.

Tom smiled as he watched Brent chalk out each word carefully upon the inner side of the red-painted door. One could not possibly miss seeing the message or greeting as he was disposed to call it. It read:

DEAR. MR. BOATHOUSE:

WE HAD A VERY PLEASANT DAY. THE WATER WAS WARM AND THE EATS DEELICIOUS. SO WE JUST COULD NOT GO AWAY WITHOUT THANKING YOU FOR YOUR KIND HOSPITALITY.

WE COULDN'T GET THROUGH THE WINDOW SO WE HAD TO BREAK THE PADLOCK. BUT THEY'RE CHEAP AT HALF THE PRICE. ANYWAY WE COULDN'T SIT OUTSIDE—THE GROUND'S SOGGY AND EVERYTHING'S ALL WET.

HOPING YOU ARE THE SAME,

THE GIRLS OF THE P. D. Q.

(Fraternity)

(EENA)
(MEENA)
(MINA)
(MO)

"How's that, Tomasso?" Brent queried when he had finished. "Do you think he'll accuse us of a neighborly call today?"

"Gosh, no," Tom answered. "That's what I call a neat job. I only hope he doesn't come back early this morning—I mean early enough to get wise that it's only a ruse."

"I have an idea he won't," Brent said confidently. "I think he's a night worker, Tommy."

They left the door standing ajar and the padlock where it fell. In a little while they were on their way downstream and soon came abreast of the wreck. The tide was rising and they could see only a little bit of its gray, ghostly finger.

"Let's rest here a while, Tommy," Brent said. "You can't see much of *Carrie* when the tide is like this."

"No, and I'm glad of it," Tom laughed. "I don't see why you're so interested in the slimy-looking thing."

"Be careful how you talk about the girl I love," he said soberly. *"Dear old Carrie!"* he added as if profoundly touched.

"You nut," laughed Tom. "You ought to come up here at low tide and chop a piece off of her if you love her as much as all that. Then you'll have something to look at when the tide is high."

"That's not a bad idea," he drawled.

His face was serious however when he looked across at the silent bit of hulk. The river lapped in little wavelets around it and then hurried on its

course. One could imagine with little effort that the shades of the *Carrie C. Boardman* must have often looked on, a little envious at this ever changing tide, while she must lie half-concealed, half-revealed in her grave of rock and mud awaiting her final passage across the eternal sea.

"When you get through dreaming, let me know," Tom laughed. "I'm pretty keen for a cup of coffee."

"Huh? Oh yes—you must be," Brent said, sitting up and mentally shaking himself out of his musing. "You'll pardon my abstraction, Tommy. I guess I've really fallen in love with *Carrie.*"

"There's no doubt about it, old kid," Tom laughed, as he took up the oars. "What is it you love about her most, her eyes or her hair?"

"Neither," Brent answered quizzically, stretching his long legs the full length of the seat ahead. "I think it's her hand I love most and that long, tapering finger."

Tom shuddered visibly. "You're a weird bird, Brent. You certainly have an uncanny way of making dead people and dead schooners live again when you talk of them."

"It's that immortal quality I have," Brent said whimsically. "Either that or I'm dead myself and don't know it."

Tom laughed but soon became serious again. "Getting down to brass tacks though, what do you suppose that bird is doing up at the boathouse?" he asked.

"Now that, Tommy, is a question," Brent answered.

CHAPTER XIII

A DAY'S DIVERSION

AND it *was* a question: One that was to be left unsolved for a little while to come. For a week and then two weeks passed by and in all that time neither Tom nor Brent saw anything of the little yellow light. Neither did they hear a mysterious canoe swish under the bridge in the darkness.

"He's given it up, whatever he was after," Tom said when the end of the second week had passed. "I guess he was afraid of being discovered."

"Somehow I suspect that he was a little jarred by the girls of the P. D. Q.," Brent said. "And then again he might have slipped on one of those banana skins in the dark and cracked his noodle."

"I doubt it," Tom laughed. "He looks and acts pretty wary."

And thus they talked of him a little less each

day until when the end of the next week had come he was quite forgotten. They were engrossed in other things—that is, Tom was. He had succeeded in cutting down all the weeds on both sides of the drawbridge. Also he had succeeded in trimming the woodbine. Brent, of course, worked hard looking on.

"What do you say we go to the movies?" Brent asked Tom. "We ought to—it's Saturday, you know."

"That's right," said Tom. "But do you think it's safe to leave the shack alone with our stuff in it—I mean since we don't know what that fellow intends doing?"

"Leave it to me," Brent drawled. "I'll make a fancy no-trespassing sign."

"Do you think you'll be more contented next week for having a little diversion today?" Tom asked.

"One afternoon at the movies will be all I need to make me appreciate the hallowed quiet of this neck of the woods, as my trooper friend called it," Brent said. "We'll stop in my house and get a free meal too. Then we can row up here leisurely

by the light of the moon. There's going to be a swell moon tonight or tomorrow night. Anyway, there'll be a moon."

"And we'll have the tide with us until quite late," said Tom. "It'll be low around one-thirty or two so we better be going now."

They were in Bridgeboro a little before noon and after the boat was safely anchored at the Boat Club they went over to Main Street and sauntered along the busy street. Just as the twelve o'clock whistle blew they found themselves in front of the Bridgeboro Item Building, Bridgeboro's enterprising newspaper. Next door to it was a restaurant and already several of the *Item* employees were hurrying through the revolving doors bent on having a quick lunch.

"We might as well eat now, too," Tom remarked. "This place is as good as any and as long as we're here there's no use of going further."

"Very good idea," Brent said. "The air on Old River has an extraordinary effect on my appetite."

They walked in and sat down on the stools at

the long lunch counter that occupied the front portion of the restaurant. In the back were tables where one could dine more leisurely. But Tom preferred the counter.

"We can grab a mouthful and be right on time for the organ concert," he said hurriedly scanning the menu. "It starts at twelve-thirty and we'll have a nice, long afternoon."

"Then we might as well order sandwiches and take them with us," Brent drawled. "I prefer music with my occasional bites to eating sandwiches in a mouthful. I love the rattle of waxed paper in the movies anyway."

Tom laughed heartily. "Not me," he said. "When I go I like to listen to the music and keep my eyes on the picture. It may not be worth looking at but just the same I like to get my money's worth. Anyway, we don't have to worry about eating so much now. You said we could grab something at your house for supper, didn't you?"

"I said we'd eat some supper, not *grab* it," Brent answered. "And hear me now, Tommy boy, we're going to get my little portable Victrola

and we're going to pick out some of the snappy records I have home. I've got to have a little music if we're going to hang out on that lively bridge for the rest of the summer. Don't figure on rowing up Old River until late—even midnight would be too early for me."

Tom felt someone brush past his arm. He turned and saw a slim young man reaching over the counter for his check from the alert waiter. The young man bowed his apology for the accidental contact and hurried off to the desk at the door.

Tom turned completely around on his stool and stared after him as if he had seen a ghost. It wasn't until the young man had become part of Main Street's Saturday crowd that he paid any attention to his inquiring friend.

"Was that Santa Claus you saw or your great-grandfather's ghost?" Brent queried.

"Neither," Tom answered thoughtfully. "Why, didn't you see him?"

"Who?"

"The fellow that was sitting alongside of me. He works for the *Bridgeboro Item*—a reporter.

Gosh, I can't think of his name now. But his profile and the way he walks sure does remind me of . . ."

"If you begin from the beginning, I might talk business with you," said Brent.

"I'm positive he's the same bird I saw that night," Tom snapped. "The one at the boat-house."

CHAPTER XIV

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

"WELL, what's the matter with him?" Brent asked, his mouth full of chicken sandwich.

"Nothing. But he was sitting right alongside of me eating and I never knew it till he asked the waiter for his check. Then I got a look at his profile and when he walked toward the door I was pretty sure that he's the same one."

"Well, the fact that he was eating alongside of you proves nothing," Brent said whimsically. "And the fact that he asked for his check proves that he's honest. So no matter how you look at it, Tommy, you have nothing more against him than that he doesn't like to be bothered with neighbors. And I don't blame him for that! Perhaps we wouldn't like ourselves so much either if we had us for neighbors."

Tom swallowed some hot coffee. "You're crazy—absolutely crazy!" he said. "But you

may be right about him. No use getting fussed up until I have to, huh?"

"That's my little code of life, Tommy," Brent answered. "Divide up your energy. Always keep one eye on your peace of mind."

At that juncture the question of dessert came up so that their topic of conversation was soon lost in a maze of pie, Danish pastry and pudding. And it was thus that they were absorbed until they had to hurry away to the movies.

The afternoon and evening wore away and it wasn't until eleven o'clock that they got away from Brent's house. He carried his Victrola records and Tom had the Victrola. The moon was showing full and the air seemed to steal some of its silver magic in the soft breeze that floated around them.

"Do you think I'd be violating any of the tenement house laws if I played some records on the way up?" Brent asked after they got started.

"Well, I know if you woke me up with it, I'd lift the screen and throw the alarm clock at you," said Tom. "I don't know about these people along here and up at North Bridgeboro. Anyway, you better wait till we turn up Old River."

"But Tommy," Brent protested, "I'll promise to play nothing but soft music—waltzes. Besides, most of these people along here are still down on Main Street."

"You'll be surprised to find out how many aren't if you start playing that thing," Tom laughed.

Brent took his advice, however, and they rowed silently past the darkened houses. Up at North Bridgeboro where Old River began was a tiny colony of summer bungalows skirting the banks on either shore. Here many of the people were still up as evidenced by the lights and sounds of merriment.

It was with a little twinge of regret that they moved out of this carefree area of people and lights and rowed silently into the still, marshy region through which Old River flowed. Only the moon twinkled a mischievous eye high above them and Brent's waltz music sounded almost wistful on the night breeze.

"Notwithstanding the mosquitoes and the smell of mud," Brent drawled, "this place has a certain romance about it. Don't you think so, Tommy?"

"Sure, it has," Tom agreed. "It has tradition

where the main river hasn't. Tradition has a lot to do with a place—I don't care what anyone says. And you think you care most for lights and people but when you get up here you find out you don't. Now isn't that so?"

"Very true, Tommy," Brent answered as he put another record on. "The only thing I object to is their lack of drug stores in these out of the way places. That's the only thing that makes me homesick."

Tom laughingly ignored that remark. "We'll have to wade through the mud up at the bridge," he warned. "The tide's almost dead low."

"Am I to understand by that that I'll have to labor?" Brent asked as if alarmed.

"Sure," Tom smiled. "We'll have to pull this scow through it and get her clear. She'd be washed away by morning and then you'd have to walk into Bridgeboro the next time you wanted to go. How about it?"

"I'll help you pull her up, Tommy," he answered. "I'll have no desire, ever, to walk to Bridgeboro."

Tom was right. The tide was at its lowest when they got up to the bridge and the mud

looked almost drab color in the moonlight. It was after one o'clock when the boat was safe up on the banks and their bundles deposited in the shack.

The little place was stuffy and hot from being closed up so long. "Me for the great outdoors!" Tom exclaimed. "We'll have to let it cool off before we can sleep."

"I told you this morning to leave the door open," Brent reminded him. "There was nothing anyone could take but the crowbar and we'd be just as well off without it. It would spoil the woodbine to open the bridge anyway. We'd have that as a good excuse if anyone did come."

"All right," laughed Tom. "But as it happens we've got the crowbar safe and this place will cool off in a little while. Get your camp chair and come out and sit in the moonlight. It will do you good."

"How about the mosquitoes?"

Tom went out without answering and Brent took up his chair and followed him onto the bridge. There was a soft, cool breeze blowing and Tom sat up on one of the wobbly, rusty rails.

Brent opened the chair with careful delibera-

tion and sat down in such a manner as to have a clear view up the river. The moon was moving farther west but still shed a good light over the stream. He adjusted his spectacles and gazed, seemingly, into space.

Perhaps it was the hour, perhaps the moonlight, but something there was that cast a spell upon these two. They sat in rapt meditation for ten, fifteen minutes. Nothing stirred except the leaves on the nearby trees.

Afterward, neither one could say who first espied the strange sight. But it was Brent who said: "Tommy, what do you see up there—where Carrie is?"

Tom jumped down from the railing. "I've been looking at it myself," he said thoughtfully. "I was wondering if I was seeing things. But there *is* something else alongside of that wreck. Do you see it too?"

Brent rose also and walked over to the broken rail. "It looks to be something partly in the mud and partly over Carrie. And the tide is coming in fast, Tommy," he said, in measured tones.

"What do you think it is?" Tom asked, aroused.

It's hard to tell from here," Brent answered. "But to me, it looks very much like a human being —a man."

CHAPTER XV

THE UNFORTUNATE STRANGER

ONCE again they waded through the mud, dragging the boat after them. Then hurriedly they pushed it out into the stream and started up the river. Neither one spoke.

As they neared the scene of the wreck they could see a canoe a few feet away from the prone figure. "Someone that's hit the wreck at flood tide, I bet," Tom said impulsively.

"And what about the canoe?" Brent asked. "That seems to be perfectly all right."

"Gosh, yes. I never thought of that," said Tom. "But after all the question remains, is he alive?"

"We'll soon find out."

They got their boat over as far as they could. Tom took one of the oars as he stepped out into the mud. "I'll try this first," he said. "If that sinks, then we'll try it from another angle. It's

kind of risky, we don't know whether there's any holes around here or not."

"Something tells me it's safe," Brent said. "Didn't you say you heard that Carrie was resting mostly on rock?"

"That's what."

"Well, we'll take the chance. But I'm positive there's no risk involved."

Tom looked at his friend inquiringly but refrained from asking any questions. Time was precious and the tide was coming in fast. Step by step, he went with Brent following at his heels. When they got within ten or twelve feet of the hulk they realized that the mud was hard and firm, albeit a trifle slippery.

"You'll have to watch your step, Brent," Tom warned, "or you'll land on your ear!"

"I'm afraid that's just what happened to our friend here," Brent said.

Indeed, it looked as if that was what had happened to him. They found him lying face downward, his head directly upon the exposed bit of wreck and his feet, protected by hip boots, were hanging over in the mud. Together they turned him around and saw that a cruel gash in the

temple was the cause of his condition. He was still bleeding quite profusely and was quite unconscious.

"That was a lucky break for him that we happened out on the bridge," Brent said tying up the young man's forehead with his handkerchief. "I'll have to borrow yours, too, Tommy. I think he'll be all right as long as we can stop the bleeding. One of us will have to go to Teetville and see about getting a doctor. I think they have one there, though."

It seemed odd for Tom to remain so quiet in the face of such excitement. And it did not dawn upon Brent that his friend was unusually so until he finished the task of binding up the young man's head. Then he looked up, to see Tom's features drawn up in surprise.

"What's the matter?" Brent queried.

"It just came to me—*all of a sudden!*" Tom exclaimed. "His name is Wallace Ryder—Wallie Ryder they call him. That's it!"

"Well, he's got a right to have a name, every bit as much as you have," Brent drawled. "Come on, Tommy, we'll have a job carrying him. I'll take his head."

"Don't you understand?" Tom whispered, carefully lifting the unconscious young man.

"Sure, I understand," Brent answered, getting a firm hold on his share of the burden. "He's the reporter that you were talking about today—the one you think you saw in the boathouse."

Tom was visibly amazed. "How did you know?" he asked.

"Watch your step now, Tommy," Brent said by way of an answer. "Lift him over easy when you get to the boat. A sudden jar might bring him to and I'd rather that doesn't happen until after we're in the shack."

Tom was on the point of asking another question but Brent interposed. "Leave this all to me," he said. "Papa Brent's got a lot up his sleeve about this whole matter."

Tom said not another word but laid the unconscious reporter inside the boat. Then he waded back for the canoe while Brent waited and watched. And with each passing minute the tide crept higher up the battered hulk of the *Carrie C. Boardman.*

"He would have drowned in another fifteen minutes," Tom said, tying the trim canoe to the

stern of their boat. "That's what I call sheer luck."

"Have you looked inside that canoe?" Brent asked quietly.

"No; why?"

"There ought to be something there. For instance—a pickaxe?"

Tom looked. "There is, all right," he whistled softly. "And a shovel, too! Gosh, there's something uncanny about you, Brent. How . . ."

"Never mind *how,* Tomasso. Let's get down to the bridge, first. You'll learn everything in good time. So will I—I hope!"

Tom rowed back with brisk energy. But they had a difficult time of it before they got the unconscious fellow into the shack and had him resting comfortably. Brent washed his forehead and with Tom's help got his coat off.

"Now run along to Teetville, Tommy. It would take me too long and we want to get a doctor as quickly as we can," Brent said. "I think he'll come around all right—he seems to be just out from loss of blood. But don't tell *anyone anything* but that Wallie slipped and fell

in the mud and cut his head on a sharp stone. Don't forget!"

Brent walked to the door with him but Tom wasn't satisfied with that explanation. "Why all this mystery? he asked. "If you've got something up your sleeve, I don't know why you can't tell me!"

"There's nothing to tell, Tommy," Brent drawled complacently. "And if there *is* a mystery why Carrie is the guilty one. Wallie seems unusually devoted to her. He even brings a pickaxe and shovel to lay on her grave."

Tom shook his head disgustedly and bolted out of the door. "If there wasn't a mystery before, you've made it one now," he said with a mixture of humor and despair."

CHAPTER XVI

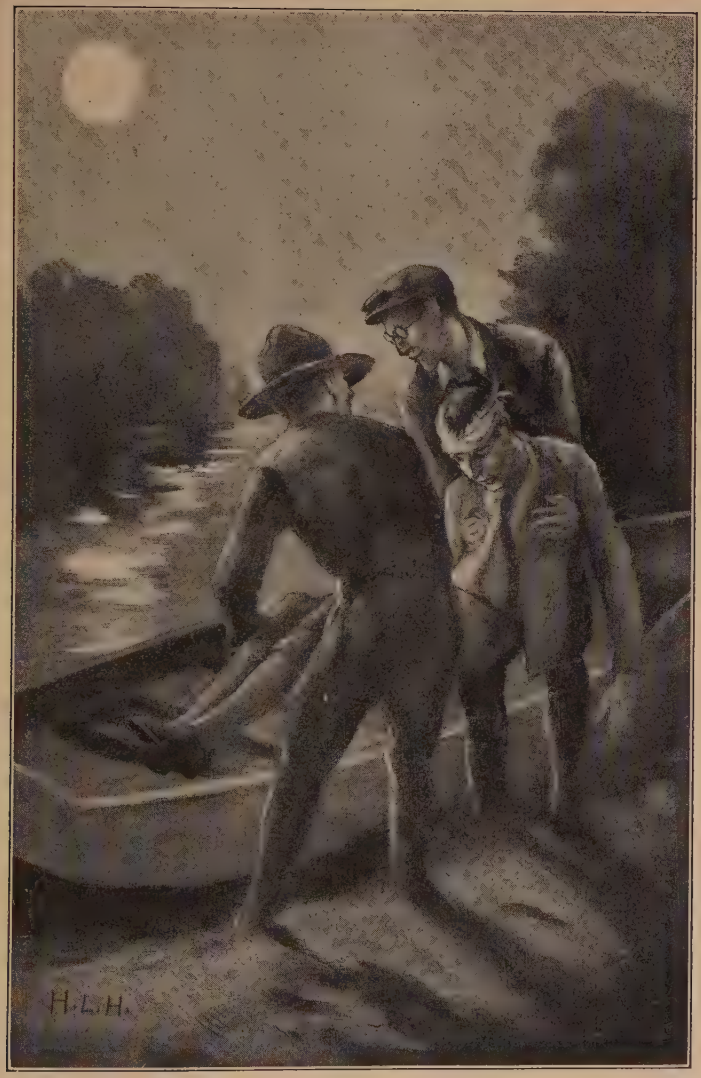
A POOR EXCUSE

BRENT went back to Ryder and bathed his head and wrists with cold water. He sat down alongside of him, waiting and watching while the young man gradually regained consciousness. He seemed to breathe easier with each passing second and the bleeding was lessening.

After a little while his lids drew back slowly. He took in Brent and his immediate surroundings with a puzzled, questioning expression in his brown eyes, then closed them wearily. That he was very weak was evident.

Brent got an idea and went to his bag. He hunted around in it and soon brought out a bottle of spirits of ammonia from which he prepared a medium dose. With this he hurried back to Ryder's side and held the uncorked bottle under his nose.

It did the work and his eyes opened again.



THEY LAID THE UNCONSCIOUS REPORTER INSIDE THE BOAT.

Tom Slade in the Haunted Cavern. *Page* 109

Brent smiled and sat down on the edge of the cot, glass in hand. "Here's something that'll keep your eyes open," he said gently.

Ryder smiled faintly and Brent noticed that little wrinkles formed around his eyes as he did so. He took the proffered dose, but with a great deal of assistance. When he was finished his head sank heavily back on the pillow.

"Kind of all in, eh?" Brent queried cheerfully.

"Yes," he answered in a weak whisper, without opening his eyes. "Guess—I—slipped in the mud, huh?"

"You did. But don't bother yourself about it now, Billie," Brent said.

"Name's Wallie," he corrected. "Wallie Ryder. Where'm I?"

"At the bridge-tender's shack, Wallie. Don't get excited. "Tommy—Tom Slade went to Teetville for a doctor. They ought to be here pretty soon. Anyway, I guess you're coming around all O.K., eh?"

"Yep. Thanks, very much."

He seemed contented after that. And if he was aware of who Tom Slade was it could not be divined by any changing expression upon his face.

But Brent knew he was thinking it all over.

After a time he stirred uneasily. "Er—er—I—I—was bobbin' for eels," he said slowly. "Got out o' my canoe. Where's it?"

"Safe," Brent answered. "We tied it up with our row-boat under the bridge."

He nodded. Then he looked at Brent weakly. "Funny how I slipped bobbin' for eels, huh?"

"Not at all," Brent answered whimsically. "It happens to the best of people."

Ryder looked rather puzzled but smiled. "Seen you some'eres, haven't I?"

Brent smiled pleasantly and looked over his spectacles in that old-mannish way he affects at times. "I'm the only one that looks like me so I guess you must have seen me."

Ryder smiled, the little wrinkles forming around his pleasant brown eyes. "Am I hurt much? My head aches."

"I should think it would," Brent said. "*Carrie* gave you an awful crack."

"*Carrie?*" Ryder asked, raising his thick black brows.

"That's her name, all right," Brent answered with a studied nonchalance. "That's what I call

her anyway. It's the wreck up there—the old schooner *Carrie C. Boardman,* that's what I'm raving about."

Ryder closed his eyes tightly with the ghost of a smile playing over his features. Then straightway he grew serious. "Do you know much about the *Carrie C. Boardman?*" he asked in a whisper.

"Not so much," answered Brent. "She sank twenty-five years before I knew there was a Santy Claus. The most I know about *Carrie* is that she points a mean finger, don't you think so, Wallie?"

Ryder smiled. He almost laughed but his weakness prevented him. He had to be satisfied to lie in a half-sleep for the next few minutes to get back his strength. Finally his lips moved. "You're a lad after my own heart, To—what did you say your name was?"

"Gaylong," he answered. "Brent Gaylong. Tom Slade is the fellow that went to Teetville for the doctor. You ought to know him. He's been a worker in the Scouts for years."

Ryder nodded. "I've heard of him. Nice feller."

Brent heard the welcome sound of a car rattling the loose boards of the bridge. He got up and walked to the door in time to greet Tom and the doctor. Ryder opened his eyes as the trio entered and watched them anxiously.

"Did you—did you tell how I was bobbin' for eels?" he asked Brent.

"No," Brent answered. "They just this minute came in. But don't worry, Wally, the doctor will bring you around all right."

Ryder smiled and the doctor nodded. "You'll be fine in a few days. Just rest where you are and you'll be ready for the next adventure that comes along. You're just weak from loss of blood," he said in a pleasant voice.

Before the doctor had closed his bag, Ryder was sound asleep. Brent and Tom went out on the bridge and saw the car off for Teetville. After that they stood talking in the dark, solemn chill of early morning.

"No matter what he's done or what he was up to, I'm glad we saved him," Tom was saying. He was looking upstream, now in the grip of flood tide.

"Well, Tommy," Brent said seriously, "he

is up to something, there's no denying that. And he's mysterious—more than I am. But one thing —he's new at the game."

"What game?"

"Mystery."

"How can you tell?" Tom insisted.

"You've a lot to learn, Tommy. So has Wally. He didn't have the common sense to wait until his mind was capable of thinking clearly. Right off, he must tell me why he was up at the wreck. And he let his poor sore head muddle his tongue and he succeeded in muddling it very much."

"How?"

"For instance," Brent said, "he mentioned that he was bobbing for eels and that he had stepped out of the canoe and slipped in the mud that way."

"Gosh, we never thought of that!" Tom exclaimed impulsively. "And here we were thinking all kinds of things about him! *Why sure*—he could have been bobbing for eels! Why—why did you say that about him muddling his tongue? Why do you say *that?*"

"Because no one goes bobbing for eels with a pickaxe and shovel," Brent answered. "You'll have to admit that much, Tommy."

CHAPTER XVII

A DISCUSSION OF TALENTS

By Monday morning, Ryder was coming around nicely. Tom went to Teetville to telephone his landlady and his employer of his accident and the convalescent young man warned him to say that he wouldn't be back in Bridgeboro until Wednesday morning.

Ryder was a restless mortal in bed but exceptionally amiable. Brent wondered if he ever lost his temper and saw nothing about the young fellow to dislike or distrust.

He was sitting up when Tom returned from Teetville and was making himself perfectly at home in the crude little shack. Brent had contributed his bathrobe and slippers and Tom had loaned him a pair of pajamas so that he was quite comfortable and heartily enjoying the rôle of invalid.

Tom smiled as he caught sight of him. "Gosh,

you look like a regular patient now," he said, sitting wearily down on Brent's cot. "Phew, that's a long hike in the hot sun!"

"Betcha life!" Ryder sympathized. "But I'll do the same for you some day—both of you. *Goodnight,* I owe you my life!"

"Forget it," Tom smiled. "It's given us something to do, hasn't it, Brent?"

Brent came out of the kitchette bearing two glasses of lemonade. "Tommy's right," he said, handing one glass to Tom and the other to Ryder. "I'm glad it's happened in a way. If things had gone on like they were before we found you, I would now be a fit patient for an observation ward. In fact, on that fateful night I was tempted to go up and disport with *Carrie* in the moonlight."

"Goodnight," Ryder laughed, catching the thread of Brent's humor. "You must have been pretty hard up." Then with a suggestion of a smile. "You're pretty stuck on *Carrie,* as you call her, huh?"

"Oh, it's just a passing fancy," Brent drawled. He went back to the kitchette and brought back a glass of lemonade for himself. "You

see, Wallie, *Carrie's* the only girl in sight. There's no one or nothing else to look at for miles. You can hardly blame me for being a willing victim."

"How about you, Slade?" Ryder queried casually. "Have you got the bug, too?"

Tom swallowed his lemonade in one gulp, reached over and put the glass on the table. "Thank heavens, no," he answered. "I never did go in for that kind of stuff, Ryder. But Brent's never happy unless he has something dead to attach himself to."

"Thank you, Tommy," Brent smiled. "I've been attached to you for years."

"And you're not so dead, either," Ryder put in, with a quick laugh. "You get there even if you do have to go around the block once or twice. Anyway, you sure would make a pip of a nurse."

"I'm glad you said that, Wallie," Brent remarked. "I knew I must have some kind of a calling but until you mentioned it, I could not distinguish the sound."

They laughed heartily. Tom gave his friend a warm nod. "Brent's all right," he told Ryder,

CHAPTER IV

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

TOM admits that their life for just ten days was a blissful round of eating, sleeping and loafing. Brent, of course, forced that admission from him in the light of later events, because he (to quote his exact statement) didn't want the public hoodwinked into thinking that he'd be so foolish as to break the spell of their Elysian existence.

Brent also claims that Tom began weakening the threads by wanting to cut down the weeds and trim the vines that were twining so enchantingly around the bridge and even up to the door of the shack. "Why, that's the very thing that makes this place so charming, Tommy," he said in his delightful, drawling way. "Cut down the weeds and I'll no longer feel as if I'm a vagabond."

"Don't you know that's what draws the mosquitoes?" Tom demanded, standing with a sickle in his hand.

"Nonsense," Brent answered. "We'd get them from the marsh in any case. In point of fact, I don't mind them so much—it makes me feel more vagabondish to fight off the pests. Poor defenseless wretch at the mercy of the denizens of the swamp and all that stuff—you know! Contracts a deadly fever as a result and is nursed back to health by his true comrade, Tomasso Slade! I like the sound of that, don't you, Tommy?"

"You sound as if you weren't quite sound in mind. That's how you sound," Tom laughed. "You'd soon cry for a truce with the pests if we had a spell of some nice, sticky weather. Believe me, you wouldn't feel very pretty if they got a good hold on you some night. You'd wake up looking like a natural map of the Rockies—bump upon bump. Do I cut down the weeds or not?"

Brent heaved a sigh of relief. "Just as you say, Tommy," he drawled. "Do I have any part in the labor?"

"Only to gather it up after it's cut," Tom laughed. "That's the easiest part of it. You

can pile it up on the bank and when it dries out we'll burn it up."

"We'll?"

"I will," Tom laughed. "I'll have this place looking civilized if it takes me all day long to do it in."

"Take your time, Tommy," Brent drawled languidly. "It won't matter if I gather it up tomorrow, will it?"

"Oh, I suppose it will end up in me doing the whole thing," Tom grinned.

"You would have only yourself to blame if you do," Brent said. "And I don't like the idea of making this place look civilized—we came up here to get away from civilization. You said yourself that it was the ideal place for roughing it—wild and deserted."

Tom's back shook from laughter as he bent over the sickle. "Do you ever stop to realize the time you spend in arguing? Think of the energy you could use!"

"Think of the energy I save—that's the point," Brent returned. "But I'm afraid I'll have no peace from now on. When you get restless it

sounds the death knell to all my slumbering proclivities."

"Good," said Tom. "Now you can put them to good use."

Brent sighed and dragged his long, lanky frame around gathering up the fruits of Tom's toil. He had to take it up by the handful and it was well along toward evening before the patch just down off the bridge was cleared. It was evident that it would take another day before they could clear it up to the shack.

At any rate Tom announced that he was hungry —an announcement that caused Brent no end of relief. Indeed, he immediately offered to quit and get the supper so that Tom could work on uninterruptedly. "We'll do the dishes together afterward," he suggested, "and then we'll both be able to rest in the twilight."

"You will, you mean," Tom laughed. "Anyway, let's eat."

Twilight was indeed upon them before the dishes were done and they were glad enough to get out of the stuffy little shack. It had grown considerably warmer within the last hour and the humidity was oppressive. Not a blade of grass

moved and except for the sound of the water lapping against the river banks the silence was deadly.

"I'd give the world to see a traffic signal now," drawled Brent as he came out of the shack into the gathering darkness. "Do you think the county would appropriate an arc light for the bridge if we asked them, Tommy?"

"Like fun they would," Tom laughed. "Anyway, you'd be wishing it out of the way if we had one because then we'd have skeenteen kinds of night bugs and bats flying around us when we wanted to enjoy the night breeze."

"I never thought of that," Brent said. "But on a dark night like this a little light wouldn't go bad. Lighting the way to happiness and all that sort of stuff."

"Talking about lights," Tom said seriously, "I'm not so sure but what you are getting your wish." He was looking intently up the river and his arms rested on the broken bridge rail.

"What do you mean, Tommy?" Brent said strolling over to his side.

"Look for yourself and see," answered Tom, pointing.

Brent looked up along the bank where a tiny light cast its cheery glow out upon the river. By all the laws of human nature it should have symbolized friendliness and hospitality in that lonely place but somehow it did not. Not to Tom, at any rate. It had rather a hostile effect instead, and that meant that it puzzled him.

Brent was not aware of any such feeling. He was merely indifferent about it. Perhaps the afternoon's work was responsible. At any rate he blinked his eyes lazily at the little glow and let his long arms support the weight of his body heavily resting upon the broken bridge rail.

"A light is a light, Tommy," he said at length. "The longer I watch it the more I'm convinced that it's a light!"

CHAPTER V

"WHO'S THERE?"

TOM was too interested, too curious, to take notice of Brent's banter. Something had challenged his adventurous spirit and he was on the alert at once. "It's funny," he said, squinting so that he might see farther in the dark. "I can't make out where that light is. Maybe it's a camper though, huh?"

"Not necessarily, Tommy," Brent answered, quizzically. "It might be a lightning bug."

"A lightning bug isn't stationary," Tom said in his boisterous way. "Not this long anyhow."

"Now that's a question for science," Brent said, soberly. "It's something I've often wanted to find out. A lightning bug must certainly rest at some time or other. But when? Or where? Yes, Tommy, it's the ambition of my young life to find out about the life, death and Christian sufferings of the little lightning bug."

Tom suppressed a smile with difficulty. "You're crazy as usual. But we'll talk about that later. The lightning bug theory is disposed of right now. For one thing, the light we're after is at least a quarter of a mile from here. Don't you think so?"

"Whatever you say," Brent answered complacently.

"But I want your opinion," Tom persisted. "What do you think about the light?"

"I think it's fine just where it is," Brent drawled whimsically. "I wouldn't have it any nearer."

Tom stood with his arms akimbo. "Say, will you be serious for a minute? I'm just curious about it because we haven't seen a soul around here daytimes. It's been dead as far as civilization goes. . . . "

"Until you got the idea of cutting down the weeds," Brent interposed languidly. "Now all we've got is dead weeds."

"There you go," Tom said a little nettled. "Listen to what I'm saying, will you?"

"I'm all ears, Tommy. I have nothing else."

"All right, then. We've been here a week

and there hasn't been a human being pass up this river and except for about three or four cars that whizzed along over this bridge we might as well have been in the desert as far as we knew. That is, where neighbors were concerned. Now all all of a sudden we see a light spring up out of the darkness—in this comparative wilderness!"

"Well, it must be campers then," said Brent. "We'll arrive unanimously at that decision because I want to go to bed in peace."

"All right," said Tom laughingly. "It's settled—they're campers. But we'll go and take a look up around there tomorrow, huh? Give them a friendly, neighborly call. What do you say?"

"I have no say in the matter, Tommy," Brent said, in weary tones. "You've decided to go up there so that ends it. I was afraid that our nice, quiet week would get you going. Now you're set to go on the rampage so I suppose I must make the best of it."

That next day, however, there was much to be done. Brent had to go into Teetville for some supplies and Tom decided to go with him. When they got back they were busy about the shack

and they had quite forgotten about calling on their strange neighbor or neighbors up the river.

Before they were aware of it another sun had set, and another twilight wrapped the river and neighboring woods in its protecting shadows. A solemn peace pervaded all. Then suddenly, night, black and starless, shut off the world from the two outside the bridge-tender's shack.

Brent was sprawling rather than sitting in a camp chair, which he had purchased in Teetville that day. His long, lanky legs were crossed in a nonchalant attitude and his bespectacled head was tilted in such a manner that it rested lightly against the side of the shack and afforded him an unobstructed view of the inky heavens—if indeed one can get a view on such a night.

Tom was pacing back and forth across the rickety little bridge in that nervous way he sometimes has when he gets restless and has nothing to do. Each time he walked off the western end of it he stepped on some loose boards that rattled audibly in the quiet night. And coming back the noise would be repeated.

"Can't you jump across those loose boards, Tommy?" queried Brent.

"If I could I wouldn't be here," he answered. "I'd be over at the Olympic games doing my stuff. There's about twenty feet of planking to jump—*you* ought to be able to do it with your height and you could too, with a little practice!"

"Not at my age," Brent drawled. "I'm long on height and short on wind. That's the sad part of it. Otherwise I feel that would have been my calling."

Tom laughed, then stopped suddenly and looked up the river. "Brent!" he called in guarded tones. "Brent, if it isn't that light again!"

"Again or yet?" queried Brent complacently. He did not move a muscle.

"How do I know?" Tom returned. "We didn't stay up all last night to watch it. Maybe it *is* the same light still burning. Anyway, it's a light and we should have gone up there sometime today. *We should have!*"

"Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow," Brent drawled. "I've always found that a delightful rule to go by. If we had gone up there today we would know tonight what and where that light is."

"Well, isn't that what we want to know?" Tom demanded.

"Certainly," Brent answered leisurely. "But by having put it off today we have another night to wonder and speculate in. In other words, it gives us something to look at and think of tonight. Get my point, Tommy?"

Tom turned away from the rail and glanced despairingly in Brent's direction. "I get your point," he said, shaking his head. "But the question looms larger tonight than it did last night. Why, if they are campers, haven't we seen their smoke today? And why haven't we seen some sign of them bathing or fishing? No one camps at the river's edge just to sit and look—they come to a place like this to fish and swim. We do anyhow! We ought to have seen some sign of them today. Heaven knows they would be near enough for us to see. The light is just about where the fountain-pen adventurer and myself cast our lines on our way up the first day I saw this place. There's an old boathouse there and the landing's rotted away. Nothing but a few sticks of wood left. Up above it, a mile maybe, is the old Boardman place. But we couldn't see

a light from there anyway. The woods are in between."

"I'm glad of that," Brent sighed, "and I'm sorry that there was ever a day when you and the professor cast your lines."

Tom chuckled. "That's what he said. But it's a fact, Brent, and it makes me wonder. Why, we sat right under that decrepit old boathouse for four hours. That's where we caught the bullheads. Gosh, I counted every board nailed up against those windows. The one window facing this way had a couple of loose boards that looked as if they had been sort of forced into that position. And that's why I'm curious about it—it looks just as if the light was shining through a sort of chink."

Even as he spoke the light was suddenly extinguished. It happened so quickly that Tom could not be sure but what it was some trick that the darkness had played upon his concentrated vision. He snapped his eyes shut thinking it might have been strain, but when he opened them again he was convinced that the little yellow gleam was indeed gone.

"Well, it's out, all right," he observed.

"Thank goodness for that," Brent remarked, rising. "Now there's nothing to prevent us having a peaceful game of checkers, is there, Tommy?"

"No, you lazy bird!" Tom laughed. "But I won't feel contented until I look that up tomorrow."

"Neither will I," drawled Brent, carefully folding his camp chair. He stopped for a moment and sniffed the heavy, warm air. "Tide must be going out, Tommy. I smell mud and feel mosquitoes."

"Right you are, Brent. She'll be dead low by midnight, I guess."

Brent walked inside and was lighting the oil lamp as Tom entered. The tiny glow cast weird shadows about the dark, dingy walls, but gradually as the flames spread through the wick the place seemed suddenly transformed and became instantly cozy and cheerful looking.

Tom drew two chairs up to their little oak table and Brent went over to his cot and pulled out from under it a checker board. "That's one thing I don't like about this place," he said as he spread it out on the table. "The architect

made no provision whatsoever for closet room. Here we have to keep our clothes in our bags and the rest of the dustproof articles under our cots. What kind of a way is that to build a shack?"

Tom laughed. "You ought to complain to him, Brent, not me."

"He's dead probably," Brent said. "And if he isn't he ought to be. That was a silly idea of his in making that fake locker. What good is it to us?"

"He might have meant it to be a locker or cupboard or whatever you want to call it," said Tom, taking the checkers out of their box. "But I suppose the owner suddenly decided to dig a well there instead."

"Well, I hope he fell into it," Brent drawled. "Maybe that's the reason it dried up. Anyway, I'm going to climb down there some day before the summer's over. I hope I find his skeleton or that eel—it doesn't make any difference."

For the next half hour there was little sound, save for the soft scrape of the checkers being moved back and forth upon the board. The players were annoyed by the occasional buzz of

a mosquito picking out its prey. As it landed there it would pause, then a resounding swat—and the game would proceed.

It was on one of these occasions when Brent was the victim that he slapped his head heartily in quest of the pesky creature and in his distraction lost the game to Tom.

"That means we better call quits for tonight," he said, stretching his long arms lazily. "When there's a bunch of those things around I can't keep my mind on my knitting. I can only do one thing at a time. What do you say we turn in?"

"Righto," said Tom cheerfully. "If I thought there was any chance of us coming up here next summer I'd get a screen door for this shebang."

"Ask the county to appropriate us one," Brent suggested.

"Yes, and catch them doing it too," Tom said as he blew out the light.

Suddenly they were both aware of a sound other than that of their own voices. They stood still and listened and they could hear distinctly the lap, lap of water quite near.

"Raining, I wonder?" Tom queried as he

when he works there's none better. But he likes to sport once in a while—gambling, I guess. Anyway he gets to borrowing money on his salary for weeks ahead and he's always up to his neck in debt. He didn't borrow any from you fellers, huh?"

Tom shook his head. "All we can say is, we liked him."

"So does almost every one," Mr. Finley said with a frown. "That's why I've put up with his nonsense for the last year. Between you fellers and myself I'll tell you that Wally ain't got any real friends—I mean like you and me. Anyway, I've tried to be his friend but he won't listen. That's the reason I came up here. Something happened today that looks bad for him."

"You mean he's in trouble?" Tom asked quickly.

Mr. Finley took off his hat for the first time and fanned his bald head for a moment, then replaced it. "I'm afraid he is in trouble," he said. "To begin with . . ."

"Just a minute, Mr. Finley," Brent interposed, going toward the door with the tablecloth in his hand. "I just want to shake out the crumbs

and I'll be right back. I can always talk better when everything is in order. I have the soul of a housewife."

Mr. Finley laughed, seeming to enjoy Brent's easy going humor immensely. But Tom was nettled and impatient with the interruption. He was in no mood for delay. He had to wait for Brent's return, however, and that leisurely person came in folding the tablecloth neatly.

"That's only one of my household accomplishments," Brent drawled. "I've devised a plan of putting the dishes in a crab net and lowering them into the river. It requires absolutely no effort —they soak while you talk."

"Will you shut up and let Mr. Finley talk?" Tom snapped.

"He's a sure cure for the blues," Mr. Finley said with a blink of each eye. Wally ought to be like him—he'd never have gotten into trouble."

"That's where I interrupted you," Brent apologized.

"Yeh, so it was," the man continued. "I meant that to begin with, Wally's been borrowing on his salary. Naturally I've been suspicious and when I've asked him questions he gives me eva-

sive answers. Where he ever came from he wouldn't let on. He always kept that up his sleeve.

"I never questioned him any more about it because I figured it was his own business as long as he did his work and behaved himself on the job. But lately the boss has been kicking to me about the way he's been drawing on his salary."

The man took his handkerchief from a coat pocket and wiped his perspiring forehead. "Anyway, I asked him about it—why he was doing it. And all he told me was that he was in some financial trouble and he was trying to pay it back. He said the people he owed money to were pressing him for it."

"Gosh, that's too bad!" Tom exclaimed.

"Is it very serious?" Brent inquired.

"Serious!" repeated Mr. Finley. "It's worse than he's told me, I guess. Two men came in my office this morning and showed me a picture of Wallie. Then they asked me if he worked for me?"

"What did you tell them?" Tom asked.

"What could I tell them? A man in my position can't lie to . . ."

"Detectives?" Tom asked increduously.

Mr. Finley nodded and there was a faint smile across his straight, thin lips. "Sure, they were," he answered. "And they're right on the job for him, too."

CHAPTER XX

OLD TIGHTHEART

"Do you suppose they'll find him in Bridgeboro now?" Tom asked anxiously.

"If they do, that's his lookout," answered Mr. Finley. "But I sure would like to see him about that parrot. He bought it from an old lady and she was in to see me today too. That is, she was looking for Wally because he paid her the money for it and she wants him to have it."

"What do suppose he would want with a parrot?"

"Well, er—I guess he's quite a remarkable bird," Mr. Finley answered. "From what she says he is. And he has had a lot of experience I suppose, coming from the Boardman family."

"Boardman?" Brent queried.

"That's what," he answered. "The old lady that has the parrot used to be their housekeeper or something. Her name is Hannah Brown—

Aunt Hannah, she calls herself. Anyway, she told me some interesting things and all in all I guess that Wally won't have much use for the bird if those fellers lay hold of him. So I'd like to buy him, you can bet."

"How did Wallie get acquainted with this Hannah Brown?" Brent asked casually.

"Oh, he's been preparing some old stuff from our files of forty or more years back. We're getting up a column of Bridgeboro, Fifty Years Ago," Mr. Finley explained hurriedly. "I assigned him to the job and he's been loafing like the dickens. The past was too much for him, I guess. Anyway, he weeded out this Mrs. Brown —he's pretty clever at that.

"But she told me some interesting things this morning and I suppose she told Wally the same thing. She said she was with the Boardman people for years and didn't leave the mansion until the daughter Carrie died. She was the last of the family and I hear that the state is going to take over the property within the next month —there aren't any heirs. It'll be a big swoop because all this land on both sides of the river from here up to the mansion belonged to them."

"I wonder if I could disguise myself as an heir?" Brent remarked.

Mr. Finley smiled and continued, "The parrot belonged to Hollis Boardman, the son. She said he chatters about that last homeward journey as if it was yesterday. So I suppose that Wally, being a natural adventurer, took a fancy to that bird. Anyway, I wouldn't mind having him."

The parrot seemed to be on Mr. Finley's mind more than anything else. But not so with Tom or Brent. They were thinking of the genial Wally, hunted and threatened by the long arm of the law. It seemed incredible to them that one so amiable could be now dodging a heavy shadow.

They were relieved to see Mr. Finley go. His visit had distracted them more than anything and when his car rattled away into the night, Tom said: "Thank heavens, he's gone!"

"The same here, Tommy," Brent agreed. "He certainly rubbed it into poor Wally more than I would have done."

"You had a different way of doing it," Tom said. "Somehow he sounded as if he had the knife in the poor chap."

"There's no doubt of it. I'm glad we said nothing about how we found him that night."

"I'm glad I told him Monday over the phone. I gave him the lie that Wally gave us—about bobbing for eels."

"Well, he deserves it," Brent admitted. "Would you want to take a trip down to Bridgeboro, Tommy? I wouldn't mind seeing Wally and tipping him off. I don't mean that we ought to help him evade the law but maybe it isn't so bad but what two friends could help him."

"You mean to go tonight?" Tom asked.

"Sure, the tide's pretty high and we'd get down there about ten," Brent answered. "Are you willing?"

"Now I wish I had my flivver here," Tom said, hustling around to make himself presentable in Bridgeboro.

"We're just as well off without it," Brent said complacently. He was struggling with his tie before a mirror that had been in service twenty-five years too long. All he could see in it was his nose and just below his chin. He had to bend his head to see his eyes and when in that position

his forehead was reflected as painfully narrow with little cracks here and there.

He studied the frame of the mirror for a minute, then called Tom's attention to it. "That last bridge-tender was digging around in mud," he said. "It's dried on the frame until now it's just like cement."

"I wish you could use some of your snoopiness in Ryder's trouble, Brent," Tom said. "You don't think he's committed any serious crime like . . ."

"Killing his rival in the pie-eating contest or absconding with the poorhouse funds? No, Tommy," Brent said quizzically. "He doesn't look that kind. I think he's just been foolish."

"I hope so. Anyway, we'll look him up at his boarding house and say a prayer that those detectives haven't got there. Gosh, I think the least Mr. Finley could have done was to ward them off a little while."

"Maybe Wally had a reason for calling him Old Tightheart, eh?" Brent queried.

"Maybe is right. I don't think he has any heart, if you ask me. But say, Brent," Tom

said, as he brushed his hair, "Don't you think it's a coincidence that Ryder got so friendly with that Boardman servant and us finding him up at the Boardman wreck and all? Why all this Boardman stuff, anyway?"

"Now you're asking something, Tommy," Brent answered. "The whole thing is beginning to take form like a game of chess. Wally, Mr. Finley and Hannah Brown. There's a delicate piece of strategy somewhere if we can only find where."

CHAPTER XXI

THE BOARDMAN TRAGEDY

At the house where Ryder boarded they were doomed to disappointment. His landlady graciously informed them that two strange men had inquired about him early that evening. Shortly after that, she said, Wally came in and when she told him of the strangers he seemed annoyed. Later he appeared in her kitchen, bag and baggage, and told her he was suddenly called away. He left the house through the back door, going through the yard to Main Street.

"That looks like the last of Wally in Bridgeboro," Tom said, with disappointment evident in his voice. "That is, if they didn't catch him before."

"Let's look up Aunt Hannah Brown," Brent suggested.

Tom acted upon that quickly and hurried into a drug store and looked her up in the city direc-

tory. He came out with the welcome news that she lived down on River Street, a little above the Boat Club, and they hurried along lest they should find that she had retired for the night.

But the light in Aunt Hannah Brown's kitchen was reassuring and they rang the bell for admittance into her tiny cottage. Presently her white head appeared in the doorway and Brent explained their mission. She welcomed them inside.

"Now you're just too late if you're looking for Mr. Ryder," she explained. "He was here up until, oh, maybe an hour ago. We had a nice long talk and he said he had to go away so he came to take the parrot."

"Wally seemed quite interested in the parrot, didn't he?" Brent queried.

"He sure was," the old lady answered. "Mascot's a right smart old bird!" Suddenly she stopped and asked them to sit down. Taking a rocker for herself she looked closely over at them and squinted her wrinkled forehead up still more. "Say, you two ain't got nothing to do with the newspaper people, have you?" she asked.

Brent said they hadn't.

Her face brightened. "He warned me about

talking to anyone because he said if his boss from the newspaper should come I wasn't to tell him that he took the parrot but that I sold it to someone else. He don't want him to know anything —I guess they didn't get along very well."

"Did he take the parrot's cage and all?" Brent queried.

"Sure thing, he did," Mrs. Brown answered pleasantly. "He put the whole business in his car. I hope Mascot brings him good luck though —that bird ain't brought any too much luck to the Boardman family or to me," she said reminiscently.

"How so?" Brent asked.

"Well, I ain't never heard the full story of it," Mrs. Brown said, rocking back and forth violently. "Mr. Boardman was sick from the time he stepped foot in the house after the schooner sank until he died. He brought the parrot and said we were to be good to him because Hollis had been so fond o' it."

"Do you happen to know just what *did* happen to him?" Brent asked quietly.

"Hollis? Oh, yes—that was too sad for words," she said, evidently happy to talk of the

past as most old people are. "It broke poor Mr. Boardman up more than the schooner. They had an office down there in the West Indies at a place called San Do—do—something. I can't think of that name half the time."

"Domingo?" Brent queried.

"That's it, young man," she smiled. "Well, they were closing the warehouse and office on account of a revolution there and the rebels threatened to kill Hollis and his father and their American employees because they were loyal to the official government.

"They had to get away in a hurry, things got so bad. The banks were all closed down and so they had been keeping their money in a tin box like some people do. It was the only way they could do and they decided that Hollis should get it out of the office safe and follow his father to the schooner as soon as it got dark. I heard there was valuable papers in that box too."

"What about the parrot?" Tom asked impulsively.

"So you're interested too!" she smiled. "Well, that's where Mascot came in. Mr. Boardman got up the idea of hiding the box in the

parrot's cage when Hollis carried it down that night. He thought of that because the people down there won't harm a parrot for anything. They're superstitious about it.

"I've heard of that," Brent put in. "They're afraid if they kill them that their spirits will haunt them."

"It's a good thing they're afraid of something," said Aunt Hannah indignantly. "Anyway, poor Hollis started for the schooner after dark with the box inside the cage. He had it covered so that they could just see where the parrot was. But the poor feller never got to the schooner."

"Killed?" Tom asked.

Mrs. Brown nodded her white head. "They found him the next morning lying in the lane just a little way from where the schooner was waiting. He had been stabbed in the back but Mascot was as fit as a fiddle in his cage. And it's the same cage that he has to this day."

"What about the box?" Brent queried.

"Oh, it was gone—clean gone," she answered. "But Mascot was screaming like everything—all that Mr. Boardman had ordered poor Hollis to

do with the box. You ought to hear him get on the rampage sometime. 'Hide it in the fore-peak!' he yells. That's where they had planned to hide it when the poor lad got it on the schooner. But they didn't get it there and they had to sail quick. I guess you know the rest of the sad story."

Brent nodded. "And didn't Mr. Boardman ever mention anything about the treasure in the box?" he asked with a great deal of interest.

"He didn't care any more," Aunt Hannah answered. "He used to say over and over that his lost treasure was Hollis. We never dared mention it in front of him again after he got so bad. That's why the schooner was left there too. He said you couldn't bring life into the dead. He was getting demented then."

"Did the daughter live long after?" Brent persisted curiously.

"Only three years," she answered. "Neither of the poor things had anything for years before, and I had seen them *rich!* Think of what a come-down! I helped them with the money I saved and they never knew it, thank goodness. Those were sad days!"

"And why do you think the parrot brought you hard luck?" Tom asked.

"He hasn't brought me good luck—I know that!" she answered vehemently. "I married a little while after Miss Carrie died and my poor husband only lived a year. So here I've been alone ever since with poor health at times and now when I ought to be comfortable in a nice Old Ladies' Home, I'm still trying to work to get in there. I have to have a hundred and fifty dollars more and I used to say that Mascot kept me poor buying food for him. So I had to sell him and now I hope that he brings luck to nice Mr. Ryder."

"I hope so," Brent said, and they got up to go. "We'll come and see you again, Mrs. Brown. We'll sort of keep track of you while Wally's away."

They left her pleased and smiling and walked down the quiet street to the Boat Club. Tom was thoughtful until after they reached the river. Then he stopped short and faced Brent, perplexed.

"Look here, old man," he said quickly. "I know there's some muddle behind all this—be-

hind the parrot and that schooner and all that I said before we came down here. And I've got a sneaking suspicion that you've been sleuthing the thing out in your bean too, haven't you?"

Brent looked into Tom's eager face and smiled whimsically. "All I'd like to see is that bird's cage, Tommy," he drawled. "One look at that and I'll let you in on my inspiration."

"We'll never see it unless we see Ryder," Tom said listlessly. "And that will probably be—never."

CHAPTER XXII

MASCOT

It was nearing three o'clock when they rowed their way upstream on the last lap of their journey. Tom was almost asleep over his oars and Brent was stretched full length in the bottom of the boat. He was awakened quite rudely when one of the oars slipped and caused a veritable shower of river water in upon his placid features.

"I'd have thought you did that on purpose if you were anyone else," he said sleepily, and trying to shake the water out of his clothes. "But I know that you have nothing but a kind regard for me, haven't you, Tommy?"

"Absolutely," Tom answered mechanically. "Take those other oars, Brent, and let's get back there as quick as we can. Gosh, I'm tired!"

Brent did as he was told but it was another fifteen minutes before they rolled alongside of the bank at the bridge. "Heaven bless our home,"

he drawled, as they scraped through the mud. "I'm really thankful for even this little shack, aren't you, Tommy? Mid pleasures and palaces . . ."

"Say, are you going to quit spilling out your fancy stuff and give me a hand?" Tom said, irritably. "There's no reason why you should be tired. You had a nap up here and I didn't."

"But think of the naps I haven't had since you dragged me into these adventurous wilds," Brent reminded him, good-naturedly. "I lost a whole night looking for you and another night in Wally's interests. When you come down to it, Tommy, my whole summer has been consecrated to your love of adventure."

"I suppose you haven't gotten any kick out of it, either?" Tom laughed. "You sounded interested enough down at Mrs. Brown's. You're as keyed up as I am every bit!"

"Only to make you happy," Brent drawled. "My interests are unselfish entirely."

Tom began whistling a refrain that sounded something like "That's a lot of bunk!" At any rate he got the boat tied up and lent a helping hand to Brent in scrambling up the slippery em-

bankment. Suddenly he stopped and laid a detaining hand upon his friend's shoulder.

"Sh!" he whispered. "I heard something rustle, sort of. It sounded like someone taking a long, deep breath."

"That was me—it's my advanced age," Brent drawled.

"Can't you . . . " Tom began.

"Down the lane!" a shrill voice called eerily out of the darkness. *"Hurry! Down the lane!"*

Tom drew up rigidly and clasped Brent's shoulder in his excitement. They stood side by side and breathed as one. Then distinctly a rustle reached their listening ears and they heard something move softly.

"Hurry!" it repeated shrilly. *"Down the lane!"*

Tom's moist hand touched Brent's. "Shall we call?" he asked in a voice that was less than a whisper.

Brent returned the pressure of Tom's hand. "We'll wait—see what else we hear!"

"But whoever it is—they know we're here. That somebody's here!" Tom reminded him. "They could hear us talking before."

"I know," said Brent, "Just wait—it seems to come right from the shack."

But all was still again and the voice seemed to have returned to that tomb of darkness beyond the end of the bridge from whence it had come. The very quiet of the place became so intense that a passing breeze seemed almost to profane it. Then the faint echo of an owl from the distant woods broke the spell.

"There's something blamed funny about that!" Tom spoke a little louder.

Brent nodded and tried to peer ahead of them into the darkness. "Who's there?" he called.

While they waited, they heard the peculiar rustling noise again. Then the voice: *"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry down the lane!"*

"Gosh!" said Tom.

"Hide it in the forepeak!" screamed the voice.

Brent lifted his long, lanky legs up over the embankment and stood upon the dry, hard ground outside of the shack. Tom followed him breathlessly.

"Hide it in the forepeak!" the voice screamed shrilly at the sound of Tom's hurrying feet. *"Hurry!"*

Tom lighted a match, laughing almost hysterically. The little area favored by the tiny light revealed Brent's camp chair standing against the side of the shack just as he had left it. On the chair was the bird cage with the parrot fluttering about it.

Its funny eyes blinked up at Tom mischievously. Then the match went out. Brent stood watching over Tom's shoulder as he lighted another match. The bird crouched in one corner of the cage.

"Hello, Mascot, *you old fool!*" Brent greeted him.

"Hello yourself!" the bird returned amiably and straightway flew up on his perch.

"That's a fine thing to be teaching a venerable old bird like that," Tom laughed. "I guess it means that Ryder's been here, huh?"

"Well, Mascot didn't fly here cage and all, did you, old egg?"

"Hide it in the forepeak!" screamed the bird as Tom's second match went out.

"All right, Mascot," Tom said soothingly. "We'll get you out of the dark." He went to lift the cage up but Brent detained him.

"Wait a minute, Tomasso," he said, "I want to try that trick once more."

"What trick?"

"Wait a minute." Then: *"Who's there?"* he called as before.

"Hurry!" the bird answered. *"Down the lane —hurry!"*

"All right," said Brent to Tom. "Let's go in and light up. That's all I wanted to know. Now we'll see if Wally's left any message for us."

"And what's the idea?" Tom queried as Brent lighted the lamp. "What did you find out?"

"I once heard that a parrot remembers best and longest what he hears in the dark," Brent answered.

Tom set the cage down on the table and in between a top and side bar a piece of white paper was jammed. Brent drew it out.

"Now lend an ear to what Wally has to say," he said.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LETTER

BRENT unfolded the slip of paper and spread it out on the table directly under the lamp. Tom moved to his side and they read it together.

DEAR GAYLONG AND SLADE:

Now look what I've wished on you! None other than Mascot, heir to the late Boardmans. I bought him from old Aunt Hannah Brown on River Street, their last servant. I won't bother to explain very much to *you*, Gaylong—I guess you know it all. You're a pretty wise bird and I know you've been on to me.

Anyway, the dope is this: I haven't been gambling as my kind boss will endeavor to tell you. I've been paying off a former folly of mine. In other words I was a bank clerk five years ago—savy? Correct—the amount was five thousand before I could say Jack Robinson!

It's the truth when I say I was willing to stand the gaff for that but the president of the bank was an old friend of the family and to keep in right with his board of directors he had to make a charge. So I had to beat it (with his help) on the promise that I would pay back every cent. I've paid three thousand so far

and it's taken a lot to do it, believe me, for incidentally I support my mother and a crippled sister. That was five years ago and here a couple of months ago I start rummaging in the old files and rake up a lot of Boardman history.

That's how I got acquainted with Aunt Hannah and when I heard the parrot do his stuff I was convinced that there was treasure somewhere. It seemed like a beautiful dream to think that maybe I could pay off that other two thousand and go home after all this time. And Gaylong, I *still* believe that stuff came up from the Indies on your beloved *Carrie!*

Give an attentive ear to the bird and I know you'll fall the same as I did. Only I didn't get the chance to hunt very long. The night you found me was my first adventure—I broke in that old boathouse up the line and sneaked a canoe and hid my flivver down in the woods. So you birds will do me a favor if you return that canoe to its proper place. That's Honest Injun.

Old Tightheart has had the knife in me for sometime past—ever since I've been writing up on this ancient history. When he accused me of being lightfingered a few weeks ago I confessed to him about my trouble home and he very kindly wrote to the directors of the bank. He's the only one who knew it outside of my family and the president.

Anyhow I had a hunch all day that I must get back to Bridgeboro and clear my things out and I'm glad I did. The Flatfeet[1] weren't far behind but I beat

[1] Detectives.

them to it anyway. It just means that I'll have to go some place and go on paying the president and helping my folks. I'm not worrying about the Flatfeet—they'll not bother me again unless someone else writes to the bank. All the president cares about is that I pay and I have paid—dearly. I haven't seen the folks in five years.

So just to spite Old Tightheart I took Mascot away from Aunt Hannah. He'd like to get him but don't give him up under any consideration. That stingy old crab would like to know what the Boardman fuss is all about. That's why I'm giving you guys the tip—do it quietly and maybe you'll have luck. Anyway I wish it to you. You've been aces up with me.

Now this isn't going to be goodbye—I'm going to drop in on you birds some dark night after things quiet down. If you've left the bridge I'll hunt you up in town. Many thanks for everything and Mascot is part payment. Maybe you'll chase away the jinx he's supposed to have, Gaylong.

Yours in treasure,
WALLY

P. S. Wonder if you'd mind keeping an eye on Aunt Hannah? She's been swell to me and she's kind of alone—oh, I know you'll do it!

"Phew, that's an eyeful," said Tom. "Gosh, I like him better than ever."

"The more I hear of Wally the more I despise Old Tightheart," Brent said, wearily flopping

down on his cot. Then he looked at Mascot blinking silently in his cage. "If you bring us hard luck, I'll bust you in the beak!" he said emphatically.

"You couldn't make me believe that," Tom said. "What's the poor bird got to do with luck? Even Ryder got the idea of treasure from his talk. If you ask me, it's good luck that he's remembered it all these years. It's a wonder Aunt Hannah never got wise to it."

"I guess she's thought it was just plain parrot prattle."

"Well, anyway, you got your wish about getting a look at the cage," Tom said spiritedly. "How is that going to help you?"

"I got a look at the cage, Tommy. A good look it was, too. It's stood the test of time remarkably well. Not an evidence of rough handling anywhere. That means the treasure got aboard that schooner somehow and without Mr. Boardman's notice. Why, even Mascot is a witness to that with his 'down the lane' business! He's heard someone call that in the dark. If the cage was twisted or bent I'd say that the revolutionists got it for they would naturally have

dragged it out of the young chap's hands if they had known there was something like treasure in it. No, I think he was killed only after the treasure was safely in the forepeak."

"Then we're going on with the hunt?" Tom asked. "Are you game?"

"Rather," drawled Brent. "But come on, Tommy and put out that light. If I'm going to labor I must have my sleep."

Tom laughed and turned out the light. After a few minutes, Mascot began to rustle restlessly in his cage. "Down the lane . . ." he began.

"Shut up!" Brent said emphatically. "We want to sleep. Now that we know it went down the lane . . . Say, Tommy?"

"Yes?"

"Remember Mrs. Brown saying that the schooner was anchored just down the lane from where they found the dead son?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Nothing, only that it's all fitting together so nicely. And when I think of how crazy I used to be about crossword puzzles. Why, they were nothing compared to this."

"Hide it in the forepeak!" yelled the bird.

"Now be a good boy, Mascot!" Brent drawled soothingly from his soft pillow. "I want to have a good night's sleep because I've got a big date with *Carrie* at low tide tomorrow. Do you hear me, Mascot—*Carrie?* Say, *Carrie!*"

The bird kept silent then. They were getting drowsy in the warm darkness and almost asleep. It was all so still that Brent could hear the tick of Tom's watch on the table.

"Did you wind up the cat and put out your watch, Tommy?" Brent queried in a sleepy voice.

Tom, startled out of a half-slumber, yelled: "Huh? Who's there?"

"Carrie!" screamed the bird. "Hear me—*Carrie!*"

"Atta boy!" Brent applauded. "You stick to Papa Brent and you'll be wearing a diamond anklet yet!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE TRAIL

At low tide the next morning Tom and Brent were up and out. They had confiscated Ryder's pickaxe and shovel for the novel adventure and turned their faces merrily upstream.

What's his is ours now," Tom laughed, referring to their tools to be used in the treasure hunt. "And *boy,* I bet he'd say, *go to it,* if he could only see us now."

"How do we know these things are Wally's?" Brent queried. "He said he got the canoe out of the boathouse and he probably figured he might as well throw the implements in too. And that reminds me, Tommy—Wally said it was the first time he had been up there. What about the gink that you saw on your hilarious night up there? Didn't you say he came in with a pickaxe and shovel—I mean carrying them?"

"Gosh, *oh gosh!*" Tom breathed despairingly.

"I know—I thought of it when we were reading Ryder's letter but I didn't want to interrupt you by asking. Of course, I believe him when he says it was his first adventure but what do you think of . . ."

"Tommy, there's a third party in on this as sure as you live! And it's the gink that you saw in the boathouse. Too bad you didn't get a look at him."

"But I did! Gosh, I told you how I noticed the way he walked."

"Yes, I remember. But speaking of the boathouse we'll have to carry out old Wally's orders and return the canoe. That'll have to go sometime today."

"I hope there's nothing new comes up to be solved," Tom complained. "My head's whirling now."

"There's nothing else except that I was going to ask what remedy you'd suggest for my insomnia," Brent drawled. "I have such difficulty getting to sleep."

"Your what?" Tom flung back at him. "You mean you have such difficulty in keeping awake. I've known you for—how many years? Well,

anyway, I've never heard you say you had enough sleep. That's a fact."

"No sarcasm, Tommy. We're going to work together like true friends and brothers," Brent said whimsically. "Here we are at dear old *Carrie's* side."

She seemed not half so gruesome looking in the pink glow of sunrise. There was even something romantic about her old-fashioned hulk appealing to a silent world of sky and water. They left their boat high and dry upon the mud and proceeded to the wreck, armed like the followers of Captain Kidd when he sought to recover his buried cache.

Tom was adorned only in his bathing suit and a pair of hip boots. He had no desire to get any of the rotting splinters in his bare feet. He took the pickaxe from Brent and began chopping away some of the caked mud that had accumulated in the bowsprit. Time and the steady flow of water had hardened it like cement.

It was an arduous task and before he had got more than a mere patch of it out the tide was flowing in again. He looked at the creeping water disgustedly. "It's a wonder it wouldn't

stay low a little longer," he said like a disappointed boy.

"And think of the times when we've wished that high tide would stay with us longer," Brent said, philosophically. "Just as I've said, the tides may come and tides may go . . ."

"I'll hit you plunk over the head with this pickaxe, if you don't clear out with your blamed philosophy," Tom laughed. "Now, just when I've got enough done to forage around in it a little—I've got to stop on account of the tide. Gosh!"

"Well, tomorrow's another day," Brent said whimsically. "Maybe we can try it tonight."

"That's the most sensible thing I've heard you say since we've been up here," Tom smiled.

"And just think, the summer isn't quite over yet," Brent added.

They did try that night—just after supper. Tom succeeded in climbing down in the cockpit a little way but encountered more mud and had to call up for the pickaxe.

"The place is chuck full of it," he yelled up, complainingly.

"Well, you'd be too if you were lying there

for forty years," Brent said by way of sympathizing with him.

Several shovelsful of mud appeared before Tom did and he emerged looking quite the counterpart of the stuff he had been digging. "You look like the cliff dwellers must have looked, Tommy," Brent said consolingly, "I understand they built their houses with plain ordinary clay and subjected it to some hardening process so that it turned to stone."

"Rather they than me," said Tom tersely. "I don't know how I can ever get anywhere down in that blamed thing. It would take a steam shovel to get it all out. Why, it'll take days and days and suppose after all my trouble the stuff isn't there. Maybe it's turned to clay too."

"That's what it hasn't, Tomasso," Brent said. "That's the best part of dollars and cents in a tin box."

"Well, we'll try again tomorrow then, huh?"

"If at first you don't succeed . . ."

"*You* can try, try again," Tom laughed. "Tomorrow will be your chance."

They decided to take the canoe up the river before it got too dark and after Tom had di-

vested himself of some mud they turned about to carry out Ryder's wishes. They rowed along quietly and spoke little so that when they were right up to the landing place one could not have heard them except for the drip drip of the oars as they drifted in toward the bank.

Tom scrambled up first and before Brent had both feet out of the boat he was startled with a "Sh!" from Tom. "Someone's coming down along the path!"

After what seemed an eternity to Brent, Tom whispered over his shoulder, "It's all right, they seem to have changed their mind and are going along that woods path with a searchlight."

"We'd better get this canoe up quickly then," Brent suggested. "There's no use of us dragging it back again."

The boathouse doors were closed but no padlock did they see anywhere. Tom kept his eye on the reflection of the light glimmering along through the upper woods path. Brent helped him put the canoe in as he had first remembered seeing it and they came out closing the doors as they found them.

Tom stood and watched the light. "Now, who

do you suppose that can be?" he asked as if exasperated.

"Maybe it's my friend the state trooper," Brent answered.

"Do you know where they're going?" Tom asked, watching intently.

"No," Brent answered.

"Well, they're going straight up that path to the old Boardman Mansion. No one told me that path led there but I can figure it out for myself, can't you? If the boathouse here belonged to them they must have had a path from their place down here."

"Correct, Tommy. Now what next?"

"Do you feel like hiking a little, Brent? You ought to; you haven't done any all summer."

"And now I'm to be dragged up to the ruined Boardman Mansion. Is that it?" Brent queried wearily.

"Well, if someone else takes the liberty of snooping around there I don't see why we can't. I've got my flashlight. Anyhow, you make out you love the memory of Carrie so—now's your chance to walk where she walked."

"And breathe the mud and mosquitoes that

she breathed," drawled Brent quizzically. "I wonder if Carrie ever sniffed mosquitoes up her nose like I've been doing since I've been up here? It's quite an exasperating thing—one never knows where they go to."

Tom laughed. "Are you game?" he asked.

"We can't row up there, can we?"

"No, I wouldn't know where to land. I've been up that far with our fountain pen adventurer, I told you, but I didn't notice if there was a good place to pull in. There's no use trying it at night even with a light."

"All right then, Tommy," Brent said. "But first go and put our boat where no one can see it, can't you? Hide it under those high weeds. I'll walk up to the Boardman place and back, but no further. And I can't swim!"

Tom laughed and hurried down to hide the boat. After he was gone Brent's whimsical expression suddenly became thoughtful and he followed the trail of the moving light almost eagerly.

CHAPTER XXV

A NIGHT PROWLER

"SHALL I use my light?" Tom asked as they started along the dark woods path.

"I don't know why not," Brent answered seriously. "There's no law preventing us from walking through here. Another thing, no one can accuse us of sneaking if we come along with a light."

"Well, that applies both ways then, huh? Do you think that other party cares to be seen?"

"I wouldn't mind knowing," Brent answered. "Let's hurry and see what's up."

Tom often said that Brent's idea of hurrying was a joke. He said that he could fall asleep walking to what his friend would call a hurried stride. But that night he broke all rules and predictions and really kept up with Tom most of the way.

They were in swampy holes more times than they were out of them but after twenty minutes they came out of the dark, dank woods into a clearing. Tom flashed his light courageously but saw that he had no need of it for the party they were following was already inside the ruined Boardman Mansion and the reflection of his light was dancing gaily on the dusty cob-webbed windows of the ground floor.

Tom put out his light. "What ought we to do—he's too interested in there and he's never thought of anyone following him, I bet," he declared.

But even as he spoke the light was gone from the windows and they heard a heavy door bang sonorously. Then the light appeared upon the veranda. The figure was moving down the steps and coming toward them.

"Behind a tree in the woods, Tommy!" Brent whispered. "Hide behind a tree."

It was a case of each man for himself and they had soon disappeared into the deep woods. The light came steadily on, on and on. It moved along the path with a precision that made Tom's

BRENT GRABBED HIS FEW POSSESSIONS WHILE TOM WAS LOOKING OUT FOR HIS OWN.

Tom Slade in the Haunted Cavern. *Page* 180

nerves tingle. Then it came abreast of him—glowed upon the broad trunk of the very tree behind which he was standing.

It was only for an instant and it passed on. But Tom did not miss the face, nor the queer running gait of the figure, nor the blinking eyes which looked to the right and to the left of the woods path. And when the light became only a tiny glow in the distance he emerged to find that Brent too was seeking him.

"Well, Tomasso," Brent said in a whisper, "I guess we've solved the mystery at last."

"I never thought about it being Mr. Finley," Tom said. "But now I know—it *was* him that night. That funny walk . . ."

"We'll go on and see what else he has to explore," Brent said. "I want to snoop in the old mansion sometime but just now Mr. Finley's explorations interest me most."

"Same here," Tom agreed. "That's all he was doing in there too—snooping. I don't think he knows about the treasure exactly, do you, Brent?"

"No, I think he's experimenting. That's why

he wanted to get poor Wally off the scene. He wants it all for himself."

"I hope he gets fooled," Tom said, as they walked on.

"He's heard from Aunt Hannah what the parrot said and I suppose he's hunted around the forepeak, too," Brent remarked.

"He can only hunt at night, anyway," Tom said. "That was a pretty clever trick of his with the lantern but I don't know how he thought he could see way down in the cockpit with that stingy light."

"Hope springs eternal . . ." Brent began.

"Sh!" Tom warned. "We'll have to be quiet along here now. We're almost at the end of the path."

Soon they came out of the woods and were approaching the boathouse when they noticed the light from the lantern gleaming down along the bank and out onto the river. They stopped and listened but heard no sound.

"I'll sneak cautiously around at the side of the building," Tom whispered after they had been waiting five minutes or so. "I'm not likely to run into him there and I'll be able to find out whether

or not he's in there. That trick of his with the light left on and going down the river may be in operation now."

Brent nodded his approval and Tom became a part of the shadows around the boathouse. After he had been gone for a few minutes a step was heard on the path and he came hurrying up.

"O.K., Brent," he said boisterously. "No sign of the old crab. And the canoe's out. It's a wonder he wasn't too surprised to take the chance and go out in it again so soon."

"Maybe he suspects us and is on his way down to visit us now," Brent suggested.

Tom whistled softly. "Well, let's go if that's what you think. Gosh, we don't want to let him see the parrot."

"We should worry about that," Brent said as they got into the boat once more. "Mascot's ours now and I'd like to see him try any funny business."

They rowed slowly and just before they reached the wreck Tom swung the boat over to the channel on his left. No one standing at the old hulk could possibly see them in the shadows and they passed on without knowing whether Mr. Finley was there or not.

As they neared the bridge Brent caught sight of a bright glow in the shack. "Did you leave the light burning, Tommy?" he asked.

"Yop," Tom answered without bothering to turn his head. "I left it down very low."

"Well, someone is paying us a visit then," Brent observed. "The light seems to have been turned up."

Before they had stepped up on the bridge they were aware of an acrid smell and as Tom reached the shack he uttered a horrified gasp. "Brent!" he exclaimed. "The place is on fire!"

To be sure the shack itself was not ignited but the oak table was enveloped in flames and the lamp told the tale lying just at the foot of the table. Mascot had evidently pushed it off and had saved himself by literally dragging cage and all off onto the floor. Brent swept him up with one arm and grabbed his few possessions with the other while Tom was looking out for his own interests.

The place was too old and the wood too dry to try and save. It went up like something resembling a fireworks display, burned itself out without touching the bridge and simmered down

to a few red embers upon the soggy ground. There was something almost pathetic in the shack's exit from this worldly plane. There was not even the shrill blast of the fire siren to herald her extinction.

Brent and Tom sat on the bridge with their few possessions and the parrot. The bird had been extremely quiet all through the conflagration but he now uttered a shrill scream as the last embers died away leaving them in utter darkness.

"Hurry!" he shrieked. "Down the lane."

"Go on!" Tom snapped at him. "You set our shack on fire. I'm beginning to believe you *are* hard luck. Now, where will we go from here?"

"Down the lane!" the bird screamed.

"Atta boy!" said Brent. "Take a tip from Mascot, Tommy. He said we should go down the lane. And why should we go from here? We've got our blankets—we can get back off the bridge and find a dry spot for the night."

"The whole thing's spoiled," Tom said sulkily. "What'll we do tomorrow?"

"That's a question," Brent answered quizzically. "The only thing I'll miss about the shack

is our kitchette. But you're enough of a Scout to solve our problem of breakfast. Anyway, I saved Mascot's lunch and thank heavens I had put my cards away in my bag."

"That's not helping us to put a roof over our heads for the few weeks that's left of summer," Tom complained.

"God's in His heaven and all's well with the world," Brent said cheerfully, squinting up at the stars. "But before you start blaming anything on poor Mascot why not ask what happened to Mr. Finley?"

"Gosh, that's so," Tom said with new interest. "He was out—the canoe was out, anyway. And he wasn't down here. I don't think he would have bothered nosing around the hulk—the tide was getting too high." He got down off the railing and rested his arms on it, leaning far over.

Brent mused on his camp chair and chatted amiably with Mascot in between times. Suddenly Tom broke in upon this irresponsible gayety.

"There's something floating toward me, Brent," he said quickly. "Coming downstream. I won't have time to go round and swim out from the bank to catch it. Shall I dive in?"

Tom had his shoes off before Brent could get up and approach the rail. "What do you think it is, Tommy?" he asked.

Tom shook his head, climbed the rail and had cleaved the water just before the shiny object came skimming under the bridge. When he came up he reached out and swung it around and pushed it ahead of him over toward the bank.

"I'm all suspense, Tommy!" Brent was calling from the bridge. "What is it?"

"The canoe," Tom answered. "It's empty, of course."

CHAPTER XXVI

A NIGHT IN THE OPEN

BRENT built a fire for Tom and he huddled close beside it, trying to dry out. There seemed to be something portentous about the empty canoe and it left them puzzled and strangely apprehensive.

As the flames leaped up into the night they clothed the embankment in a cloak of sullen red. Down below, the stream was completely enveloped in darkness and the steady murmur of its hurrying tide accentuated the sepulchral stillness that hovered over the deserted region through which Old River flowed.

"It had turned over," Tom's voice finally spoke as if from out of a tomb. "The whole inside was soaked. I suppose the force of the tide turned it right side up and sent it flying down here. Now the question remains: what has become of Mr. Finley?"

"Maybe he got mad when he saw that his pickaxe and shovel were gone and threw the canoe out in the river for spite," Brent drawled complacently. "He'd be mean enough to do that."

"He's pretty mean, all right," Tom admitted. "But he's not the kind to throw anything away. No, Brent, something else is the cause of that empty canoe."

"A man would certainly have to be unconscious to drown in Old River, Tommy. I think even *I* could keep my head up in it."

"Oh, I can't believe he's drowned," Tom said. "In any case, he would have called for help and we would have heard him."

"Well, then, that theory is disposed of," Brent said, drawing a little away from the intense heat of the fire. "Perhaps he found the treasure and was so overjoyed that he *swam* back. Who cares about a two hundred dollar canoe when he has an armful of treasure."

"Rats!" Tom exclaimed. "If *I* couldn't get any farther than I did this evening, how could he? It would take another hour's chopping at that mud before I could search in the forepeak. He couldn't only have been there fifteen minutes

or so before we came along. And I know he *wasn't* there then. We would have seen some outline of him, no matter how dark it was."

"I have it, Tommy!" Brent said suddenly. "Perhaps he was hiding behind *Carrie*. It would be just like the man to hide behind a woman."

"You're crazy!" Tom said. "Anyway, what's the use of talking and wondering about it. It doesn't get us anywhere. We won't know until . . . "

"That's it," Brent interposed. "We won't know until we call up Mr. Finley tomorrow and ask him if he drowned!"

Tom shrugged his shoulders but there was a ghost of a smile playing about his lips. "As long as I can't talk sensibly to you we might as well hunt for a place to spend the night—now that Mascot's brought us such good luck," he added, sarcastically.

"Don't be silly, Tommy," Brent said pleasantly. "Mascot wouldn't hurt a flea—he just swallows them down whole. That shows that he's a humane old codger. And we can't exactly accuse him of knocking that lamp over. That would be circumstancial evidence and I never believed

in convicting anyone on such flimsy grounds. Now if we had been in the shack to see him do it—that would be different."

"How can you fool when there's so much mystery?" Tom demanded vociferously. "Another thing—you can't deny but that all these mysterious things have happened since Mascot came on the scene. This canoe business has got on my nerves. That was a shock to see that thing coming down through the dark—*and empty!*"

"I know, Tommy," Brent said leisurely. "I had the same feeling one early Christmas morning. The mailman got me out of bed when it was yet quite dark. It was a package he had for me and when I opened it I saw that it was empty. I got quite a shock!"

"I'm not going to speak to you until tomorrow," Tom said, a bit nettled.

"And tomorrow?" Brent queried, quizzically.

"Well, I'm not going to leave this place until we find that treasure!"

"And Mr. Finley," Brent added with a yawn.

"Yes, and Mr. Finley. I'll know the why and wherefore of that canoe or . . . "

"Don't bother, Tommy," Brent drawled.

"Just consider that the canoe is a present. I don't think Mr. Finley wants it any more."

Tom went hunting for a dry spot and soon called to Brent. They were glad enough to turn in. Mascot was hunched up on his perch almost asleep. He had been unusually quiet since the last of the red embers had become dust.

"Why so pensive, old boy?" Brent asked, as he settled himself among a bed of dry leaves that Tom had prepared. Mascot had been placed quite near him.

The bird fluttered in his cage but said nothing. "Now that the damage has been done, he has nothing to say," Tom grumbled from his fragrant bunk.

"Tell him you're not guilty," Brent prompted the bird. "Tell him you'll be the means of making *Carrie* produce the treasure."

"Carrie!" the bird screamed. *"Hear me—Carrie!"*

"He's a very intelligent old scout," Brent said, ignoring Tom's sneers. "I have every confidence in him, Tomasso!"

"It's a good thing you have," Tom said. "All his intelligence amounts to is to say the same thing

he's been saying for the last forty or fifty years."

"And that amounts to *something,*" Brent said seriously. "No one would know that the treasure ever *did* go down the lane to the schooner."

"And we don't know it for sure, either," Tom added. "He may fool us on that too—I wouldn't be surprised."

"You're just on a pessimistic rampage tonight, Tomasso," Brent said soothingly. "You'll be all pepped up for another try at *Carrie* tomorrow."

Tom did not answer and must have soon fallen asleep. Brent lay awake for a long time fighting off mosquitoes. Finally he decided to endure the heat of his blanket and rolled himself in it up to his chin.

Perhaps it was fifteen minutes or so afterward. Brent said he was in the throes of first sleep and it awakened him suddenly. At first he thought it was Mascot restlessly moving about in his cage that disturbed him. But on awakening he was confident that it wasn't.

He could only liken it to a profound sigh. It seemed to come from the stream and sounded as if the water had suddenly swept up on the em-

bankment. But he knew that this was not so. Old River had not been capable of such force—not for many years past.

He was curious to know just what it was but he sleepily refused to allow himself to get up. "I suppose it's just the tide getting tired of tiding," he murmured, whimsically, to himself. "I'd get tired too if I had to rush back and forth like that night and day."

He smiled at his own thought and fell asleep again.

CHAPTER XXVII

SOMETHING UNLOOKED FOR

TOM shook Brent roughly and succeeded in awakening him. "Get up, old man—see what's been washed up on the bank!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

Brent managed to raise himself and blinked his eyes in the glaring light of morning. "Are you sure it's worth while me getting up for?" he yawned.

"Brent, *please!*" Tom pleaded.

"All right, Tommy," he said rising, and stretching his long arms. "Where to?"

Tom half pulled him out of their night's retreat and down to the bank where he pointed at the pile of driftwod that had washed up during the night.

"Well?" Brent queried.

"It's the bowsprit, Brent! Don't be stupid."

"Them's harsh words, Tommy," he said. "You mean—*Carrie?*"

"*Sure.* Do you think I'd wake you up for anything else!" He rushed down and picked up a good-sized piece of the splintered wood. In another second he was back and holding it before Brent's eyes. There were just three letters left on it—C A R. "Now what do you suppose busted it up all of a sudden?"

"You've been chopping that stuff away, you know, Tommy," Brent reminded him thoughtfully. "It *could* have weakened it."

"And it's pretty rotten—feel it," Tom said breaking it in half with but slight pressure. "That proves it, doesn't it?"

Brent nodded. "But there isn't the force in that tide—your hands are stronger by far. A frog would have a better chance of knocking it apart."

"I know. That's why I want to go and see," said Tom.

"Thank goodness, it won't be low tide for five hours yet or you'd drag me up there without my breakfast," Brent drawled. "Now may I wash my face, Tommy?"

They were up at the scene of the wreck shortly after noontime. It looked more desolate, more

ghostly than ever since part of the bowsprit had broken away. Now it looked like half a hand sticking out of the slimy mud.

"She's lost her beautiful tapering finger," Brent said mournfully, as they stepped along through the mud.

"Never mind the finger," Tom said anxiously. "Think of the forepeak—suppose that's busted up with the rest? Then what?"

"That's where you and I differ, Tomasso," Brent drawled. "You're entirely worldly in your interest in *Carrie*—her treasure you seek. But I have a beautiful, spiritual . . . "

"Shut up, will you!" Tom said, irritably. "Hand me the pickaxe. I'll get at that thing or bust!"

"Please don't, Tommy. It's bad enough that *Carrie* busted up," Brent said whimsically. "Even though you speak so disrespectively to me, I still look upon you as a friend."

"Come on, now," Tom smiled. "Help me over and into this darn hulk—it looks as if it sank further into the mud as well as breaking up, huh?"

With some difficulty Brent helped him over.

Suddenly Tom shrieked. "Don't let go of me! Give me your other arm—I'm slipping!"

Brent pulled him back quickly.

"It's a hole!" Tom panted. "A hole in the planking. My right foot went right through it! I'll see if I can't tackle it from the outside."

"Be careful, Tommy," Brent said feelingly. "Perhaps it's quicksand."

"Quicksand, nothing," Tom exclaimed impulsively. "I've loosened it with chopping. The mud's fallen through the hole. Look for yourself!"

Brent bent his long body from the waist and looked over at the gaping hole in the battered hulk. It was easily wide enough for Tom to have slipped right through. There seemed to be nothing but a black void beyond it. Brent shuddered.

"That was a narrow escape, Tommy," he said. "You would have been able to say bye bye to Papa Brent if I hadn't grabbed you right away."

Tom chopped away at the remnants of the bowsprit and in five minutes it fell off into the mud. "I have almost an hour to work at this," he said

breathlessly. "That's an awful lot of time and I ought to be able to find something."

He had leveled it off to the hole in the planking and Brent rolled up his sleeves and shoveled away the soft, slimy mud around it. A half hour passed and they had exposed another layer of the wet clay. This was flung to one side and it oozed like vapor when it landed.

"It *is* almost like quicksand," Tom admitted. "It's so wet—that's the reason."

"I'm glad it's inside the hulk, not out," Brent said, digging his shovel down heavily.

"That's what's rotted it so," Tom said with another swing of the axe. "It's only a shell, Brent—why, look! This is almost like paper." He brought away the whole gaping piece.

Brent took his turn with the shovel. "The forepeak ought to be right under here, Tommy," he said pushing the sharp steel in further with the ball of his foot.

"It ought to be," Tom said. "But I wonder if it is?"

Brent had kept his foot on the shovel but suddenly turned to Tom. His expression changed

instantly as he endeavored to pull the sharp implement out. He looked bewildered.

"I've struck something, Tommy," he said. "It doesn't feel like mud or wood or rock. Three guesses—what is it?"

"Let me feel," Tom said impulsively, and grasped the handle from his friend. "Do you think—maybe—it's the treasure?"

Brent shrugged his shoulders and stood to one side. "Try it. Does it feel like steel or what?"

Tom knocked the shovel lightly against it. "No," he answered, "it doesn't feel hard enough for that. But it's something anyway. Think I ought to heave the axe at it a couple of times?"

"No," said Brent. "You're too rough. I'll dig it out, whatever it is. I have a feminine touch with my shovel."

Tom laughed and waited willingly. He was perspiring and stopped to mop his moist forehead and face. Brent brought shovelful after shovelful of mud out between the rotted planking but soon he stopped and stood aghast.

His last shovelful had uncovered a human foot—a man's foot encased in a leather shoe!

Tom also saw it at once and the perspiration

on his face turned into a cold, clammy moisture. His hands seemed not able to leave his forehead and his legs felt hollow and weak. Brent stood stark still and had it not been for his trembling hands on the shovel one would have thought him a statue.

It seemed hours before he found his voice. Then in tones that sounded dull he said: "Shall I go on, Tommy?"

Tom nodded mechanically. "Just for a second," he answered quietly. "Then I'll—help."

Brent went on without a word. His face had taken on a grayish hue. Tom noticed that that also was the color of the sole on the dead man's shoe. He shook visibly from head to foot and without a word took the shovel from his friend.

Brent yielded to him without protest. He was too shaken and sick to speak and kept his face averted as the ghastly object became more and more revealed. He was only aware that the tide was again coming in—creeping slowly up past where they had beached their boat.

He felt Tom touch his arm lightly and he heard him say quietly: "It's Finley, Brent. *It's Mr. Ed Finley!*"

CHAPTER XXVIII

BURIED TREASURE

It was not until after the state police had borne away Mr. Finley's remains that they found the heart to meet each other's gaze. They were a dismal looking pair sitting under the elm tree out of the hot sun.

Brent stared idly at the charred ruins of the shack. "It was a ghastly end for him, Tommy —as much as he deserved something for his meanness. But think of what *you* escaped—*heavens!* I get as cold as ice when I think of it. *All for treasure!* It's awful."

"And Finley gave his life for it too," Tom said dully. "Gosh, was it worth that much? You know, Brent, I feel kind of responsible for it. If I hadn't been chopping at that mud in the evening it wouldn't have happened to him."

"And if *he* had been chopping it away (as he most certainly would have) it would have been

you," Brent said. "Tommy, your guardian angel was on the job. There's no doubt of it."

"And what of Mr. Finley's?"

"With all respect to the dead, Tomasso—I think Mr. Finley repudiated his a long time ago. Nevertheless it's ghastly."

Mascot sneezed. Tom looked at him disgustedly. "And you say he isn't hard luck? Gosh, he's twenty different kinds of it!"

Brent gave the bird an almost paternal glance. "Don't listen to him, old egg," he said soothingly. "He's in an ill humor. He'll apologize to you yet!" Then to Tom he said: "It's so damp up here for him out of doors—I'm afraid he'll get cold."

"I hope he does," Tom said stubbornly. "He ought to—and die; anyone that's lived as long as he has and brought all the hard . . . "

"Now, Tommy!" Brent interposed pleasantly. "We won't argue that again. It doesn't get us anywhere. If you were in your right mind you'd laugh at the mention of hard luck."

Brent did not wait for any further comment but got up and strolled idly over to the desolate looking pile of ashes that had once been the

shack. He kicked at it and uncovered a good-sized piece of charred wood—all that remained of the locker door. He leaned down and picked it up and gazed on the opening of the well that it had been concealing.

"If it isn't that old well!" he said. "Here it is, Tommy—right out in broad daylight too!" Then he assumed that snoopy pose that he sometimes affects and peered down into the dark void.

"Well, it's still here," he announced.

"What?" Tom asked indifferently.

"The well."

Tom could not repress a smile. "Where'd you expect it would go?" he queried, a little more good-naturedly.

"One never knows, Tommy," he answered. "I thought it might have been mixed up with the locker in the excitement. I wonder if that eel is still alive down there?"

Tom got up and walked over. "Can you see anything?" he asked curiously.

"Look for yourself!" Brent answered, pleasantly. "There's lots of nice junk down there, I bet."

"I guess you said a mouthful that time," Tom said merely glancing and turning away again. "That's about all you'd find—*junk!*"

"Well, I love to snoop in junk," Brent returned. "You don't mind me snooping a little while before we start for home, eh?"

"No, go to it," Tom answered, settling himself back under the tree.

"Just get me that fish-line out of the canoe, Tommy, will you?" he asked. "I see something shiny."

"That's either the reflection of your glasses or the sun," Tom said without stirring.

"It may be some gold fish. I'll soon know if you get me the line."

Tom got the line and stood by, amused at Brent's patient efforts in angling down the deserted well. After fifteen minutes of trying he brought up a safety pin.

Tom laughed heartily. "That's a pile, all right," he said.

Brent could not be discouraged. "Be yourself, Tomasso," he said, taking the pin carefully off the hook. "A pin is good luck, don't you

know that? Especially when it's open and the point is toward one. It's an incentive for me to hunt more."

"It takes three hours to get to Bridgeboro against the tide, do you realize that?" Tom demanded, a little nettled.

"There isn't an old well in the whole of Bridgeboro, Tommy. Just think what else must be down there if I've found a pin!"

"Just think!" Tom repeated. "That's all you'll be able to do—*think!*"

"Think what secrets of the past it must have! All deserted wells *must* have!" he insisted.

"Junk! And speaking of the past, Brent—hasn't *Carrie* been enough for you? I'm convinced that the past is as treacherous and as rotted as that wreck."

"Say not so, Tommy. I'm not at all cynical about that. And I'm curious to know what that shiny thing is doing down there."

"It was the safety pin, wasn't it?" Tom asked.

"No," Brent answered, leaning over. "Look, Tommy! See!" He bent his body almost in half in order to get a better view, and: "Oh, my! *My glasses!*"

"What?"

"They fell in, Tommy. I didn't hear anything crash though. Perhaps they're not broken—I hope not. Oh, my . . ."

"Brent, you're worse than some snoopy old lady! Now you can't see a thing, I suppose!"

"Not without my specs, Tommy. Forgive me, but will you . . ."

"Yes, I'll go down and get them," Tom finished, good-naturedly. "Suppose I should encounter a rattlesnake down there, huh?"

"Then I'd have to come to your aid—you know I would, Tommy," he answered.

Tom laughed and let himself over into the dark, yawning cavern. Many of the moldy bricks were sticking out all along the sides, having been loosened apparently by the intense heat of the burning shack. He was glad of this because it made his descent much easier.

Finally he stepped down onto the soggy bottom and put his flashlight into action. Brent's spectacles reposed unbroken on a pile of rotting newspapers. He leaned over to pick them up and the rank smell of the decaying paper quite nauseated him. For the moment it made him feel dizzy

and he missed his footing. He put out his hand on the damp wall to steady himself and succeeded in stubbing his foot against something hard.

"Did you find them, Tommy?" Brent called down anxiously.

"I did," Tom answered. "And I see your eel too—he's dead."

He kicked the papers aside. "They'd have burned if they hadn't been so wet and rotten," he said aloud. It was then that he uncovered the cause of his stubbed toe, for a black object was revealed when the pile of rubbish had been shoved to one side.

He stooped over curiously and cautiously touched the slimy looking thing, playing his light full upon it. He routed a dozen or more slugs out of a comfortable berth and they crawled hastily out of the glaring light.

After they had evacuated their position, Tom discerned a square box but it was so covered with rust that it was impossible to tell the color. He set about trying to find a few of the drier pieces of paper and tried wiping off as much of the rust as he could. His enthusiasm was mounting when Brent's voice broke in upon him.

"What ho, Tommy!" he called.

"What ho, Tommy, is right," he answered. "I've found something Brent—*gosh,* it's a steel box or tin or something—anyway, it's a box and it looks ancient."

"Go on!"

"Yep. I've got it cleaned off enough now. I'm bringing it up."

"Good."

His buoyant face presently appeared at the opening and he handed Brent his glasses, then the box. "Just cast your vision upon that and render a decision!" he exclaimed.

The lock on it had been forced off and rust filled the tiny keyhole, but it set their pulses beating at a furious pace. Tom whipped out his jackknife and pried it along the edges while Brent held it. Neither of them spoke for a single word would have dimmed their hopes.

But their fears were groundless. They knew instantly the cover flew back that they held in their own hands the treasure of the late Roscoe Boardman.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE OLD BRIDGE-TENDER

Tom gasped as he looked into the opened box. Brent held the box and peered down into it as if he were in a trance. There was no doubt but that a small fortune reposed there.

"It's thousands, Brent! *Thousands!*"

They repaired to the shade of the elm tree and breathlessly removed the money. Brent took a handful of the bills and an old envelope yellow with age slipped out from between his fingers. He stooped, picked it up and saw it to be a letter addressed and stamped—ready for postage. Leisurely he sat back against the tree and studied the envelope.

"It's addressed to Senorita Maria Fernandez," he read. "I can't make out the street address, but the rest of it is Azua de Compostela. It's in Haiti."

Tom got up and went over to Brent's side.

That complacent person had taken the worn sheet out of the envelope and held it up obligingly. It read:

MARIA:

When you get someone who can read English they will tell you how nice I write since I am in the States! This is to show you.

Two things have I learned Maria—to read and write English and to be foxy like Americans. Yes, I go to night school—it is in a nice place called Bridgeboro. A whole year did I live in that town working—digging ditches. But I was waiting for my chance and I am here in a poor American adobe where I open and close the bridge.

Why did I come here, Maria?

Ah, it is what I now write for. To tell you how I didn't forget my promise to some day come back rich to you. It was lucky that night I ran with the treasure to that schooner, the *Carrie Boardman*. You tell me once I was ill fated, but now I'll tell you how my dear friend Hollis Boardman made me lucky.

You remember I was with the other side—yes? And also you remember how the Boardman was kind to me? I didn't forget. I knew my comrades were waiting for him to leave the warehouse with the treasure. I knew they would be down at the lane's end to get him so I wait up above and tell him when he comes by in the dark.

He gave me the treasure and trusted me—he told me to hide it in the forepeak and I did. He said if I would

put it safe he would reward me. I told him to return to the warehouse and hide there until morning. But my cruel comrades did not give him the chance.

I was grieved so I shipped to the States as a deckhand on the schooner and left it at Bridgeboro. But the schooner—she sank an hour later. Was that not lucky for me?

So I hear long afterward that these Boardman people die in such what you call poverty. I think and I get foxy because I ask questions. I find out that they think my comrades take the treasure from their dead son in the Indies. No one knows it is in the schooner but me—I study it out. So soon I get this job as bridge-tender and I am near where the wreck is. Why not? It takes long but at last I dig the treasure out of that sad schooner.

Maria, it is twenty thousand dollars—American money! Before hardly you are able to translate this letter I will climb down in the old well where I hide this precious money and come home to you. Ah, what times we shall have together!

Prepare, Maria for your rich,
JAIME GOMEZ.

Brent folded the letter up slowly. The yellowed sheet emitted a faint whiff of that sad, sorry past. Jaime Gomez had not been so lucky after all.

"Gosh, it makes me feel creepy," Tom said softly. "And that poor bird must have worked

IN THE SHADE OF THE ELM TREE THEY BREATHLESSLY REMOVED THE MONEY.

Tom Slade in the Haunted Cavern. *Page* 206

hard to get it, Brent. Just think—the river was up and kicking in those days. It wasn't the Old River then."

"It must have been hard work," Brent said thoughtfully. "But there's something almost uncanny about the way it's all fitted together."

Tom nodded. "Gosh, *twenty thousand!* There would have been plenty of it to go around —Mr. Finley and all. Boy, wouldn't it be hard luck if we couldn't find Ryder now?"

"Don't worry, Tommy," Brent answered. "I think he'll show up one of these days. But talking about hard luck—what have you to say to Mascot now?"

Tom laughed. "Oh, I apologize—absolutely! He's led us right to it. Some luck that he knocked over the lamp, huh?"

Brent managed to rise and lifted up the cage. "Tommy's apologized, old egg. He thanks you, I thank you—we all thank you! Hear me? We all . . ."

"Hear me! Carrie!" the bird interposed.

"Atta boy!" Brent said whimsically.

CHAPTER XXX

ALL'S WELL

A LITTLE later Brent and Tom piled their things in the boat, tied the canoe behind and set out for Bridgeboro. Mascot occupied the center of the boat and the brass of his cage glittered giddily in the last rays of the setting sun.

It had been a great adventure and they rowed on, their minds dwelling on the tradition and romance of the little box that reposed between them. It had brought death, disaster and sorrow and Brent kept his eye upon it lest some unforeseen hand of Fate should reach out once more and grasp it from them.

"Wallie will be glad for another reason," Brent said at length and squinting at the gorgeous sunset.

"What's that, Brent?"

"Aunt Hannah. She'll be able to go to the Old Ladies' Home now—she'll be able to do anything she wants to."

"You bet. All in all, it hasn't been such a bad summer, huh?"

"No, except for the labor it has involved, Tommy. I don't want to see a pickaxe nor a shovel again."

"And I'm kind of sick of rowing," Tom laughed. "Anyway, we're some thousands of dollars richer and you have the parrot to boot. He'll be your boon companion, I suppose."

"Yes, he'll never ask me to go camping," said Brent, "nor involve me in thrilling adventures. I suppose he's too old for the wild life. I guess the best thing he can do is to watch me play solitaire."

"You're going to have a wild winter, I can see that!" Tom laughed.

Brent looked at the bird and winked. "How about it, old pal, did you hear what Tommy said?"

"Hear me—Carrie!" the bird shrieked.

"Shut up!" Tom laughed. "Carrie's gone . . ."

"But not forgotten," Brent said with a weary sigh. "I'll never love another girl as much as I did Carrie!"

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